

# POOR DEER

*a novel*



# CLAIRE OSHETSKY

author of *Chouette*

# POOR DEER



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**CLAIRE  
OSHETSKY**



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## Dedication

*To David*

## Epigraph

*Behold the mystery, the mysterious, undeserved  
beauty of the world.*

—*Joy Williams*

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# **In a Garden**

# One

AT DUSK SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD MARGARET MURPHY SITS DOWN at a narrow rickety desk in room 127 at Little Ida's Motor Lodge, eleven miles east of Niagara Falls, and begins to write her confession.

Poor Deer crouches in a corner and weeps.

*Enough of your pretty lies, Poor Deer says. It's time to tell the truth.*

Her voice is raspy and insistent, like the drilling of a tooth.

All right, Margaret says. The truth.

This is a story about two little girls on the day of the schoolyard flood.

It begins like this: *Paint me a mill town nestled in a bend of a river called Penobscot—*

\* \* \*

Paint me a mill town nestled in a bend of a river called Penobscot, about as far east as you can imagine and three hours north of anywhere you've ever heard of. A big mill broods over the town, like a castle made of brick. Its smokestacks rise up like turrets. The smoke churning out the tops settles over the houses like a soft sulfurous gauze. The sky is perpetual yellow. The houses are all the same. The streets are mostly unpaved. There are many churches. There are many believers. The boundary between the practical and the supernatural is razor-thin, and the air is filled with indistinguishable flying things: snow flurries, low-throated planes, buckshot, chaotic flocks of birds.



The town is bordered by a ring of sad small farms, with milk cows, and hogs, and sheep and lambs and chickens, and maybe a few acres of mealy potato fields. Beyond the fields come the untended woods. Children play in those woods. They come home with mysterious rashes. Wild men live in there. It's easy to get lost in there for good. It's easy for a child to wander in there and be mistaken for a deer and shot dead. Once a boy teased a moose in there and the moose trampled him nearly to death but he didn't die.

Now imagine a mother, Florence—big, angry, good. Florence is a war widow, and a romantic. She longs for gentility. She loves to dust. She loves her next-door neighbor, Ruby Bickford, and doesn't know it, because such a love lies just outside the window of Florence's imagination. Florence lives with her sister, Dolores, in the house where they were born. She works at the downtown lunch counter, where she gives free pie slices to all the single men, because she still has ambition. Dolores is a spinster who works night shift at the mill, packaging paper napkins and throwaway menus for the restaurant business. When Dolly was twelve a boy tried to teach her the game of golf and accidentally smacked her in the jaw with the club, so hard that it misaligned her jaw for good. That's why Dolly's mouth has a turned-down look, like Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow. The sisters smoke Chesterfields. They are Roman Catholic. They are raising Florence's daughter, Margaret, in the Old Testament traditions in which they themselves were raised, and the girl takes their teachings to heart: by the time she is four, she can see angels in the blades of grass, and on the backs of silverplate spoons.

Now imagine the next-door neighbor, Ruby Bickford—delicate, tragic, doomed. Dolly calls Ruby *the divorcée*. Florence calls Ruby *my dearest friend*. Ruby smokes Salems. She loves to garden. She loves her tulips. Ruby's ex-husband owns the only hardware store in town. When Ruby needs a new pair of garden gloves she travels thirty miles south, by bus, to avoid running into the bastard, and buys her gloves at the next-closest hardware store, owned by a man named Grubb. Lately Ruby has been feeling overwhelmed by life.

Everyone says she is a drinker but they're wrong—it's just her nerves. She always meant to be a dancer.

As for Ruby's daughter, Agnes, that girl's hair is the color of curdled milk. For such a small girl she moves boldly, stomping her feet along like a steadfast tin soldier. Even the thought of Agnes Bickford is like lightning. Not beautiful. No one would ever call Agnes beautiful. She is more like an arrow, aimed in a magnificent direction.

And as for Margaret—the one who is writing this confession, a dozen years after the day of the schoolyard flood—her hair is no particular color. She moves like a blind bear, knocking into things and lumbering off in unlikely directions. Margaret can never decide if the shapes moving toward her are people, or angels, or dogs or deer or wolves, but she has other skills. By the age of four she has taught herself to read, a skill that came to her after hours spent sitting in her aunt Dolly's lap while Dolly read aloud from *The Confession of Saint Patrick* and moved her finger across the page. Margaret's preferred reading isn't hagiographical, though. It's a compendium of fairy tales, the size and weight of an unabridged dictionary. Dolly hauled that book home from a tag sale one day. She keeps it alongside the cookbooks in the kitchen. Margaret likes to sit under the table with the book in her lap. She turns the pages while supper boils on the stove. Margaret's mother thinks the girl is looking at the pictures, but what Margaret likes even better than the pictures are the happy endings. After the day of the schoolyard flood, Margaret begins to write happy endings of her own. Her made-up endings help her forget that singular moment in her life when everything went so wrong. No one teaches Margaret how to write—why should they, when she is four years old and can't even recite the alphabet correctly?—and so she writes her stories down in her own, made-up, secret ciphers. She keeps her stories hidden in a shoebox under her bed, along with her clothespin family; and if Margaret ever told her mother she could read and write, and make up stories, and write them down in an alphabet she invented on her own, then her mother would have slapped her for lying—because her girl is slow, and can barely speak, and when she does speak it's nothing but

random words strung out like unmatched beads on a wire:  
*Testify. Glorious. Stuttering—*

Poor Deer has crept out of her corner. She's standing so close to me that I can feel her boggy breath on the back of my neck. She nips at my hair. Her teeth are yellow nubs of teeth, with bits of green between.

*Stop stalling—it's time to confess what you did on the day of the schoolyard flood—*

All right.

Now I'm ready to confess.

I think I'm ready.

\* \* \*

Spring came all at once on the day of the schoolyard flood. The snow melted overnight and ran down the sledding hill and into the schoolyard, where it pooled. From an upstairs window, Margaret could see what looked like a giant mirror at the end of the street. She went downstairs and pulled on her rubber boots and ran next door and rang the bell. Agnes's mother answered the door in her blue robe and slippers, even though it was past noon, and said: "Margaret Murphy! Out so early, and without a coat?" and before Margaret could answer, Agnes came slipping out through the open doorway, without finishing her lunch or saying good-bye—and now two little girls were running down the gravel street together, holding hands.

"Don't go far!" Ruby called after them.

She stood in the doorway and watched the girls running down the street on their sweet tubby legs. There was no traffic on that small gravel street. There was no danger. The sky was crowded with sudden birds clattering and the air was warm. Ruby thought about checking on her tulip beds to see if there were any fresh shoots poking up from the dirt. But then she remembered she was still in her robe and slippers, and after that she began to think of other things, besides the tulips—the bills, the familiar pain behind her eyes—and went back inside.

Agnes and Margaret were four years old. They were the same size exactly. They liked to press their foreheads together and to stare into each other's eyes and make the same faces and same gestures synchronously. Who moved first? Which was the reflection? They adored this game and could play it forever. Margaret had just discovered a new word that morning, or maybe she had just invented it—*sideways, sideways, sideways*—and she warbled the word many times in a row as she went along and mixed it in with other fine words, made up or real: *applesauce, peppermint, hot-diggity-dog*.

It wasn't far to the end of the street—just two houses down—but to the girls it felt far because it lay at the very edge of their map of the world. When they got to the end of their world they climbed through the rail fence to the other side, where the schoolyard began. What a wonder! Just the day before there had been nothing to see but dirty old snow and frozen dog turds, and now there was a mysterious lake stretching all the way to the school building. They could see the children far across the waters, inside their dim classrooms. The children in the school kept leaping up from their desks and running to the windows to stare out at the uncanny lake where their schoolyard used to be. They kept pointing out the windows at Agnes and Margaret, and asking their teachers: Who are those girls over there across the waters? Why aren't they in school like us?

A chaotic flock of flapping birds flew over. Agnes waded in.

Margaret stayed where she was, with her feet on dry land. That's how it was between them.

Margaret watched her friend slosh straight to the middle where the water was up to Agnes's knees. She saw her friend's boots fill up from the tops. She heard the sound of the water shushing around Agnes's legs and she smelled fresh new shoots of living things growing up from the ground. The sunlight shattered on the surface of the water and rose up in tiny pieces. It seemed to Margaret that she could follow those tiny pieces of light wherever they would go: up into a cloud or straight into the day after next.

Now there was an old woman standing on the other side of the waters.

She began to bellow and shout.

“Come out of that water! Come out at once!” she said.

“Come to *me!*” Agnes said.

“Insouciant little girl!” the old woman said, and went away.

*Come-to-me, insouciant-little-girl*, Margaret said, under her breath and many times in a row, until it felt like a prayer to her, incantatory, and she wasn't surprised when Agnes began running toward her in big, splashy leaps, so sudden and so happy that Margaret knew her friend was about to pull her in—but just as Agnes came into the shallows she slipped and landed hard on her bottom. Margaret yelped. She thought Agnes was hurt.

Agnes looked dazedly down at herself.

“I'm so dirty?” Agnes said—and, seeing there was no other option, she threw herself back into the muck.

Margaret felt a wave of shame on behalf of her friend. Shame was a new feeling for her. She had learned it from her mother. She frowned on purpose, a look she had also lately learned from her mother.

“You're so dirty!” she said.

Agnes had yet to learn shame. She could barely hear her friend's scoldings, because her ears were under the shallow water. She was busy exploring a new, underwater way of listening. Bits of sludge were gathering between her fingers like frogspawn in rivergrass. Her long hair was floating on the surface. The slow soft pull and tug of the water on her hair made her feel unusual, and weightless, and particular, and for the first time in her life she understood that she was an individuated person, in possession of her own body and apart from all other living things. When she stood, she was delighted to see she was covered in soft gray silt, as smooth and fresh against her skin as a brand-new pelt.

“Girls!” said a voice.

Now there was a man standing on the other side of the waters.

“Girls?” the man said again.

The girls had nothing to say to that. They watched him wend his way along the edge of the schoolyard flood, stepping and jumping, and mincing, and trying and failing to avoid the muddy places, until he was standing right next to them.

First the man looked at the girl standing in the puddle, all covered in silt.

“Come out of that mud, little girl,” he said.

To his relief, she did.

“Girls,” he said. “My name is Mr. Blunt. I teach the third-grade class at the school over there. The principal has sent me. You girls are not allowed to play on school property when school is in session.”

“We’re four years old!” the filthy one shouted. “We don’t go to that school!”

The man thought: This girl’s hair is so muddy that it’s sticking out in solid shapes behind her ears like modeling clay. She isn’t scared of me. She isn’t scared of anything. No doubt she is going to grow up to be someone interesting.

“Just wait until your mother sees you,” he said.

He looked at the other girl and thought: This girl is spotlessly clean. She’s an ordinary, forgettable, very mediocre sort of girl who will never take a single risk in life. When she grows up she will work in the mill. She will never leave town. She will die alone in her bed, in the house where she was born. This first girl, though? The one with the mud in her hair? This girl is going places—

“Where do you girls live?” he said.

They pointed.

“Are your mothers at home?”

They nodded.

“Do they know where you are?”

They nodded. The clean one had begun to cry.

“Don’t cry,” the man said. “There is no need to cry. It’s just that you girls can’t be playing on school property when school is in session.”

They looked up at him blankly. All around the birds were screaming. He thought about walking them home but they were practically home as it was.

“Very good,” he said. “Time for you to go home, then.”

He watched them climb through the split-rail fence. They began to make their way down the gravel street together, holding hands. After they were safely on their way, he traveled back through the sodden schoolyard, stepping and hopping, and failing to keep from getting mud splashed all over his shoes and his trouser bottoms. The principal had not wanted to come herself to reprimand those girls. Naturally not. She preferred keeping watch over his class and sending him out here on this muddy errand. It felt obvious to her that he was the one for the job because he was the only man on the staff. When he got back to his class, he thanked the principal, and she went away—but not without glancing down at his unkempt, muddy shoes. Never mind. He began to lead the class in reciting the eight-times table. He thought it was the end of his part in this story. He thought he’d never need to concern himself with those two little girls again. Strange how his third-grade students suddenly looked like wizened giants to him, compared with those two little girls. And he thought of his two sons, ages fourteen and eleven, and wondered why he and his wife had never tried for a daughter.

\* \* \*

Once the man went away those girls changed their minds and decided not to go home after all, because the day was still full of brash surprises, and they didn’t want to waste it.

“What do we do?” Margaret said.

“Let’s run away from this stinky old town,” Agnes said. “Let’s go to a better place. Let’s run straight into the woods where our mothers will never find us and we’ll keep on running until we get to the Land of the Pirate King, and if we’re in the mood we will join his crew, and we’ll have adventures on the seven seas and live a life of wild wonder for the rest of our days.”

Margaret was a deliberative child, not prone to making her mind up on a dime.

“I’ll be very sad if you go to a better place without me,” she said.

She was still considering it.

But Agnes had no patience for fiddle-faddle and indecision.

“What an old stick in the mud you are!” Agnes said. “I don’t like you one bit!”—and Agnes ran away all by herself into those untended woods, without looking back, and she ran so fast that, from where Margaret stood, it looked as if Agnes had disappeared in an instant—clip-clap-thunderclap!—and a tree stood in her place; and Agnes ran so fast that she came to the Land of the Pirate King by supertime, where she was given a hearty welcome, and invited to sit at the supper table with those pirates, and to share in their fine meal of rice pudding and candy-canes, and after the meal was done she pledged her fealty to the Pirate King and spent the rest of her days sailing the seven seas under the skull-and-crossbones flag.

As for poor Margaret, well. She was left behind forever, as surely as the little lame boy of Hamelin Town, with nothing to look forward to but a dull and dreary life filled with regret and what-might-have-been.

She walked home sadly.

When she got there, she hid under a table.

Margaret’s mother came striding into the room, carrying a laundry basket full of clothes—

*You’re the same lying liar you have always been—*



Poor Deer's teeth are mossy yellow nubs. Her eyes flash in primary colors.

*You've told it all wrong again—you little monster—*

All right, Poor Deer.

Here is the truth.

\* \* \*

Once the man went away those girls decided not to go home after all.

Agnes had an idea.

“Let's hide in that old toolshed in my backyard!” she said.

It was such a fine idea that the girls began to run across the lawn to the old toolshed but they only got halfway before Agnes's mother spied them through a window and came rushing out—robe flapping!—and ran across the dead-winter lawn like an old haggle-witch, yelling: “Agnes Bickford! Agnes Bickford! You filthy child! Come here this instant!” and when she caught up with those girls she grabbed her daughter by the arm and dragged her over to the hose—none too gently!—and turned the spigot. Ice cold water shuddered out. It slapped Agnes's skin. Soon her skin was blue and pimples but she didn't cry. She was not diminished in the slightest by this grotesque humiliation. Agnes's mother saw Margaret standing there and shouted: What are you staring at? Go! Go home!—and Margaret ran away so fast that her feet barely touched the ground. Once she was back inside her own house, she slipped off her boots, so quietly that her mother didn't hear, and made her way in stocking feet to the kitchen, without her mother knowing she had left the house to begin with, and she crawled under the table, to hide there, with her small heart beating.

Margaret's mother came striding into the room, carrying a laundry basket full of clothes—

*Shut up with your lies before I shut you up for good!*

Poor Deer's eyes are full of rage at my betrayals.

She looks ready to strike me down.

Am I afraid of Poor Deer?

Yes.

*Again.*

\* \* \*

After the man went away those girls didn't go home after all. Their day was ruined. The sun was hot and sticky. The first blackflies of the season had hatched and they were spinning over the girls' heads like demented halos. After the dazzle of the schoolyard flood those girls were exhausted and ready to be indoors but Agnes was too dirty to be indoors. As soon as Agnes's mother saw Agnes, covered all over in mud, she would come running out of the house to hose her daughter down with the garden hose until Agnes's skin was blue and pimples. She'd done it before. Only then would she let her daughter come anywhere near her carpets or her slipcovers.

Agnes had an idea.

"Why don't we go play in the old toolshed in my backyard?" Agnes said.

It was such a good idea that the girls began to run across the dead-winter lawn to the old toolshed, to hide there. Those girls had done their best to become invisible. They had done such a good job of it that the mothers didn't even know those girls were gone. Agnes's mother was busy weeping in her bedroom. She was thinking about how she'd always meant to be a dancer. Margaret's mother was busy peeling potatoes. She was thinking it was maybe time to check on what her girl was up to but then the telephone rang and she answered it.

At first Margaret's eyes were confused by the dim cool air inside the shed. She couldn't see Agnes anywhere. Then she saw Agnes standing in front of her, inches away. The mud on Agnes's face looked ghastly. Margaret took a step back. She saw tools hanging down from hooks on the walls. The tools belonged to Agnes's absent father. He'd left them behind after the divorce as a way to get under his ex-wife's skin. Jars of nails were hanging down from the low roof beam. Engine parts were laid out on a long wooden table in greasy pieces.

Margaret picked one of the pieces up. It felt heavy in her hand. She touched her tongue to it. At first the taste was slippery and bland but then a sharp tingle ran down the sides of her tongue and she was afraid to swallow.

She spat the taste out.

“What do we do?” Margaret said.

Agnes scratched the mud on her arm and began to turn around in a slow circle, chanting: “What do we *do*? What do we *do*?”—and stopped turning when she saw her father’s old cooler behind some fishing tackle. She invented a new game on the spot. She called her game “Awake, Oh Princess.” It was Margaret’s job to close the lid and count to ten and then to let the princess out. It was a simple enough game. Even a child could understand it. And Margaret did close the lid, and she did count to ten, and now it was time to let the princess out but Margaret couldn’t work the hasp. From inside her friend began to complain—in a muffled, dreamy way, as if shouting from a distance—and a gaping terror opened up in Margaret, so dark and so extreme that she ran home and hid under a table.

\* \* \*

Time passed so strangely for the girl hiding under the table. She had so much time that she could count to ten as many times as she wanted. Maybe a hundred times, counting the tick-tock moments as they passed by. She was getting so good at counting to ten that she decided to move on to the alphabet. The letters between *L* and *P* were still a muddled mystery to her, though. No matter how many times she started over, the letters would not come right. Some knowledge was missing. Her failures were adding up. She began to feel a rising panic—

\* \* \*

Time passed so strangely for the girl in the cooler. She had just enough left of time to feel cramped and uncertain but not enough time to feel afraid. She drank the last drops of air and then she breathed on purposelessly until she saw a wondrous tumult of color and light on the back of her closed lids. The colors soothed her. She thought of her mother. She forgot her

mother. She forgot everything. The colors grew ever wilder and more joyful—

\* \* \*

Margaret's mother came striding into the room, carrying a laundry basket full of clothes.

“There you are, Margaret,” her mother said. “What are you doing under there? Why didn't you answer me when I called? When I'm done ironing the clothes, I'm going to take you to the park to feed the ducks!”

The girl under the table forgot all about her alphabet troubles. She liked going to the park to feed the ducks. She watched her mother take out the ironing board and plug the iron in. A minute later her mother licked one finger and touched it lightly to the hot steel plate. The girl loved hearing the small sizzle of a sound that proved the iron was hot enough. She watched her mother iron her waitress uniform, taking extra care with the collar. When her mother was done ironing the uniform she moved on to the blouses. She found a loose button in the basket and she set it aside. She had just begun to hum “Catch a Falling Star and Put It in Your Pocket,” which was her favorite song in those days—on account of her Perry Como worship—when a strange gargling sound came wafting in through the window.

“What a commotion!” her mother said, and set the iron down.

The iron chuffed.

Her mother walked to the window and looked out.

Margaret closed her eyes.

## Two

**I'VE DONE IT. I'VE FINALLY DONE IT. HERE IT IS: TRUTH ITSELF,** written down on the musty old motel stationery I found in a drawer in this rented room. All night long I've been telling the truth in a scrawl so scrawling that it nearly rips the pages. I've written by the light of a garish neon sign shining in through the window—and I feel so peculiar. I feel weightless. I might go flying up into the air at any second. My mind is buzzing from so much truth-telling. I feel blessed. I feel absolved.

But then—just that quickly, even before Poor Deer has the chance to tell me what I've gotten wrong this time—I begin to doubt. I've been telling made-up stories for so long that the unadorned truth feels ugly and ungrammatical and the facts feel like borrowed broken things picked out at random from a jumble of hearsay and old gossip. Once I tried to tell my mother the truth about the day of the schoolyard flood and she slapped me and said: “MARGARET MURPHY, YOU WILL NEVER REPEAT THAT AWFUL LIE AGAIN!” and I never did.

That's when the old familiar voices in my head begin to speak to me, the way they always do. They're trying to talk me out of what I remember about the day of the schoolyard flood. You were four years old. You were too young to remember. It didn't happen that way. Your mother says you were with her all day and never left the house. She says you never stepped foot in that old toolshed. You're remembering it wrong. What you call *truth* is nothing more than Ruby Bickford's made-up story—her slander of a story—the lie she felt compelled to tell, because she couldn't admit that she had killed her own child, through selfish neglect, and had then tried to blame the girl next door for her own, criminal negligence.

I'm innocent.

Maybe I'm innocent.

Poor Deer has tucked herself miserably back in her dim corner of room 127. She has gathered her raggedy blue robes about her and covered her head with them. She is peering out at me with one moist eye. *More of your lying lies*, she says. *There was no tumult of color and light in that cooler. That girl died in the dark. When they found that girl, she was blue in the face. Her nails were split from trying to scratch her way out—her toes were clenched—you could have run for help—it should have been you in that box—*

I was four years old. I was afraid.

*You wanted her to die—you hated Agnes Bickford—*

No. I loved Agnes Bickford.

But Poor Deer persists in harassing and haranguing me until I'm almost ready to say—I give up—you're right about me—

And then, from behind the curtain, the first light of dawn begins to seep through, and I feel the creature in the corner diminishing. She is transubstantiating in reverse, from something supernatural, into something ordinary—a pile of old clothes, a shadow on the wall—until she is nearly transparent, and her voice is no more forceful than soft tears, when she says to me: *Margaret Murphy, I am nowhere near done with you—*

And then? There is no imaginary beast in the room with me.

Poor Deer has been defeated by the day.

Now it's just the three of us in room 127 of Little Ida's Motor Lodge.

Penny, Glo, and me.

\* \* \*

All night long Penny and Glo have been sleeping in the big bed, mother and daughter, tangle-legged and a-tumble and

with their long hair flung across the pillows. Penny's hair is the color of crumpled leaves. Glo's hair is the color of soft rain. It's hard to believe either of them slept at all because it's one of those motels that protects the mattresses with a waterproof cover, under the sheets—to save it from whatever ideas guests might think up, to do on mattresses—and every time either Penny or Glo turned in her sleep the mattress crackled.

Penny wakes up first and begins to tease me.

“You're right where I left you when I went to sleep,” she says. “Didn't you ever come to bed?”

She picks up the pages to see for herself what has kept me awake.

“Sweet Lord, didn't you have handwriting lessons in school? I can't make out a word! What's it about? Is it important?”

Glo wakes up and climbs into my lap and throws her sticky arms around my neck.

“I can read it, Mommy,” Glo says. “I know this story. It's a story about a sad little bunny.”

“Whatever you say, honey,” her mother says. “Let's get breakfast. Want to come, Margaret?”

I shake my head. I'm not sure if it's Poor Deer's threats that keep me here at this rickety desk, or if it's my own weary desire to finally see this through, but now that I've begun to tell this story I feel bound to follow wherever it may lead me. And whether I'm about to be the hero of my own story, or the villain, or the sacrificial lamb, or a person of no importance who is forgotten in the end, I won't know until I've come to the final page.

## Three

**WHEN MARGARET OPENED HER EYES HER MOTHER WAS GONE.** She crawled out from under the table and stood there listening to the noisy commotion coming from just outside the window. She didn't want to look out, but she did look out. She saw her mother and Agnes's mother standing in the yard. The mothers had draped themselves across each other's shoulders. The mothers were the ones making the commotion.

Margaret didn't want to look at the mothers any longer. She turned her attention to her mother's iron. Her mother had left the iron plugged in. Her mother had told her never to touch the iron, but she did touch it, and when she took her finger away the tip of her finger was ashen-white. She heard the front door open and shut. She heard her aunt Dolly's voice, calling through the house: "Bunny? Bunny?" which was the name her aunt and her mother called her even though her name wasn't Bunny.

Margaret loved her aunt but she didn't want to see her aunt just then and she crawled back under the table, to hide there.

Her aunt came into the room and unplugged the iron.

She spied the girl under the table right away.

"There you are," her aunt said. "Come out of there and I'll make you a bread-and-butter sandwich."

Margaret liked bread-and-butter sandwiches. She came out from under the table and watched her aunt make her a bread-and-butter sandwich but she couldn't eat. Her aunt sat down across the table from her and looked at Margaret sadly. Margaret thought her aunt was about to scold her for not eating the special sandwich that she'd made.



“Your mother is going to be busy for a while, helping a neighbor,” her aunt said.

“Why?” Margaret said.

“Because that’s what neighbors do,” her aunt said.

Her aunt took away her plate and then she told the girl to go wash her face. After Margaret finished washing her face her body felt dirty by comparison and she asked her aunt if she could take a bath. Her aunt said yes even though it wasn’t the girl’s bath day. Her aunt helped fill the bath and stayed to wash the girl’s back. The water was barely lukewarm but the girl didn’t complain.

After her bath was over it was as if the girl’s body gave up.

“I’m so sleepy, Aunt Dolly,” she said.

“That’s all right, Bunny,” her aunt said. “A nap will do you good.”

“When will my mother come?” Margaret said.

“Don’t worry, dear, your mother will be here when she gets here,” her aunt said.

Margaret crawled into bed even though it wasn’t dark outside and even though she was too old for a nap. Her aunt drew the curtains. Margaret could hear a commotion happening just outside her window but she didn’t listen. She closed her eyes. She closed her ears. She let no thoughts of next things trouble her and before any time passed the light was morning-soft, because the next day had come like a repeating miracle.

\* \* \*

The girl woke up feeling entirely at ease. She knew from habit that her mother would soon come into her room to open the curtains and let the morning in. Her mother would look at her with tender love, and say: “My girl always wakes up with a smile!” and Margaret would smile the best way she could, to fulfill her mother’s prophesy. But her mother didn’t come. While Margaret waited, she watched a jittering and joyful light as it moved across her bedroom ceiling. The light moved like a

happy ghost. And the light was Agnes Bickford. As soon as Margaret thought this thought, she knew it was true. Her face felt burning-hot and her questions had no end to them.

Then the light went away, and Margaret was hungry. She went downstairs only to learn that her aunt Dolly had made the dreaded oatmeal for breakfast and that her mother still hadn't come home. She had trouble swallowing her food. It wasn't just because she hated oatmeal. It was also because her aunt was watching her with unnatural interest. Margaret tried to eat with a smile, to cheer her aunt up.

"I need to tell you something, Bunny," her aunt said.

Her aunt was using her grown-up voice. It made Margaret's ears perk up.

"It's about your friend from next door," her aunt said.

Margaret put down her spoon.

"Your friend has passed away," her aunt said.

"Where?" Margaret said.

Her aunt began to cry. Margaret walked around to her aunt's side of the table and patted her aunt's white, meaty arm. The freckles on her aunt's arm were pink. Her aunt's unnatural color was on account of her working the night shift at the mill for ever so many years. Her aunt enfolded Margaret in her white meaty arms and hugged her.

"Bunny, it was God's plan for that girl to fly to Him, sooner than any of us knew," she said.

Margaret went back over to her side of the table, out of her aunt's reach.

"Did you hear me, Bunny?" her aunt said.

Margaret nodded. She tried to eat more food but she couldn't eat. She asked her aunt if she could see what was playing on the television set and her aunt said she didn't mind. The television set was upstairs in her mother's bedroom. Margaret was disappointed to learn that all three channels were playing live church services for shut-ins. She turned off the set and went back into her bedroom, where she pulled the

covers over her head because there was nothing left to do. She didn't want to go near her aunt Dolly. She was feeling very irritated with her aunt. She dozed and woke, and dozed and slept, and woke. It wasn't until she heard her mother coming in through the kitchen door downstairs that she decided to wake up all the way. Voices began to float up through the floorboards from the kitchen, the way voices did, because the house was old and drafty.

"How is she?" her aunt's voice said.

"A wreck. She blames herself. That's why I stayed the night," her mother's voice said.

"No wonder."

"What a circus. First the police, and then the coroner."

"I can imagine."

"I don't think Ruby should be left alone, Dolly," her mother said. "She's in a terrible state."

"You were there for her all night, Florence. You can't be there for her every second. You have a child of your own. What about her own family?"

"A brother, somewhere out west. I think his name is Everett. Her parents have passed."

Margaret heard her mother coming up the stairs. She could tell it was her mother coming up the stairs by the sound of her footfalls, which were dainty and graceful compared with her aunt's footfalls. She could tell when her mother came in the room because of the sudden mother-smell. She knew when her mother sat down on the edge of the bed. The bed tilted under the weight of her. Margaret felt her mother patting her foot, through the covers.

"Come out from under there, Bunny," her mother said. "Let me see your funny face."

Her mother tried to pull the covers down but Margaret hung on until her mother gave up, and then her mother began to tell her a story. Her mother's story started out exactly like her aunt's story.

“I need to tell you something, Bunny,” she said. “It’s about your friend next door. She’s gone to a better place, honey. Your friend is going to be your guardian angel from now on, and she will always look after you, and she will always love you.”

After her mother was done with her story it grew so quiet that the girl could hear the steady tick-tock of the old grandmother-clock, measuring out the seconds from her mother’s bedroom across the hall. Then she became aware of another sound, softer than the clock, and not at all steady. It was the sound of her mother crying. Margaret wanted *that* sound to stop. Her mother seemed to understand her wish, because the sound did stop, and once again all the girl could hear was the steady tick-tock of the grandmother-clock across the hall.

She felt her mother’s hand, the weight of it, on her shoulder, through the covers.

“I love you, little bunny,” her mother said.

The hand lifted. Margaret felt her mother get up from the bed. She heard her mother’s footfalls as they traveled away from her and down the stairs. The voices in the kitchen below began to recite their sad stories again.

“Everyone is blaming poor Ruby.”

“You can’t fix that, Florence. Ruby is the one to blame. She should have been keeping a better eye out.”

“Why ever did the girl climb in there to begin with?”

“Children find their own trouble. At least she didn’t suffer. It’s like going to sleep, I hear.”

“Oh, no, Dolly, no. That girl was blue in the face. Her nails were ragged from trying to claw her way out of there.”

Margaret didn’t want to listen to the voices any longer. A miracle of a distracting thought came sparkling by to save her: She remembered that dazzle-bright lake at the end of the street. She wanted to go there. This time she was going to wade right in, the way her friend had done the day before. Margaret’s yesterday-clothes were still on the floor, and she

pulled them on and went downstairs dreamily. The women were so absorbed in their sad stories that they didn't pay her any attention. Margaret wanted nothing to do with them. She crept straight to the back door where she found her rubber boots exactly where she had left them the day before, and slipped them on, and slipped outside. By habit Margaret was halfway up the path to Agnes's door before she remembered her friend had gone to a better place. She walked on to the schoolyard without ringing the bell. This time she was going to be brave, the way her friend was brave. She was going to put her boots right into the water. But when she got to the split-rail fence she saw the lake was gone. The water had drained away in the night and all that was left of the schoolyard flood was a field of ruined grass and muddy footprints. The sky was winter-gray. Margaret wished she'd worn her coat. Sad and terrible things kept happening to her. The finger she'd burnt on her mother's iron throbbed and itched. She took her finger out of her pocket to examine it. The last time she had looked at it the burnt finger had been ashen-white. Now it was yellow, and its edges were shiny. She tucked the finger inside of a fist. She put the fist in her pocket.

Something flew over. It was a flock of birds, even if it looked like flapping little clouds, or maybe angels. The flying things recognized her. That's how it felt to the girl—that those birds had given her a sudden nod, or a tipping of the wing, to signal recognition—and she wondered whether it was the same flock of birds that had flown over her head the day before. Although the birds didn't honk or cry, their flight was noisy, because they were big birds, and their wings made flapping, clapping sounds, and the wind whistled eerily through their feathers.

She watched the birds circle and fly away.

All was still.

She decided to be insouciant, the way Agnes had been insouciant the day before. She climbed through the rail fence and put her boots into the slosh and mud. She stomped forward like a brave pirate. She flopped herself down in the muck. She, Margaret, did that. She pushed her hands deep into

the sloppy mud and lifted glops of it and squeezed the gray stuff through her fists. Already there was a cool ooze creeping up between her legs. Margaret felt what Agnes must have felt: free of all worry. She tried to throw herself back into the muck, the way Agnes had done, but she couldn't make herself do it, and so she made herself content by scooping the sludge up in her hands and watching it dribble through her fingers. She squeezed mud over the top of her head. She molded her hair into fresh new shapes. No one in the school on the other side of the yard took any notice of her. The children stayed at their desks. No one looked out the window and pointed. Now that the water had drained away the children and their teachers had no interest in one little girl playing by herself in the mud. Margaret became aware of her aloneness. She felt the intense harsh strangeness of playing by herself, without her friend. And then Margaret felt a grown-up feeling. The feeling was nothing like the sharp irritations of childhood sadness. What she felt was grief, and it was new.

She pushed the feeling away.

She heard shouting, coming closer.

When she looked over her shoulder, she saw her mother running toward her, coming fast, and her mother was calling her name on the wind like a booming heraldic trumpet—"Margaret! Margaret! Margaret!"—and then her mother who hated dirt of every kind came flying over the split-rail fence and plopped her feet straight into the muckety mud and kept coming. Her mother made her awkward, sloppy way toward Margaret, and slipped, and slid, and finally fell, and ended up crawling through the ooze until she got to where her daughter sat stupefied, and she gathered the child in her muddy arms and held her tightly and kissed her many times.

"Never go out of the house again without telling me!" her mother said. "Never, never!"

Her mother tried to stand up with Margaret in her arms. Even though Margaret was a big girl, she mostly succeeded. Her mother carried her all the way home, and when they got there, her mother gave her a bath like no other bath before or since. First her mother took off Margaret's muddy clothes.

Then her mother took off her own muddy clothes. Together the two of them, mother and daughter, climbed into a hot, hot bath. The girl had never seen her mother naked before and she was full of feeling. Her mother poured slow water over her head and back and then she let Margaret do the same to her. As the girl poured water over her mother's head her mother made faces and laughed. After they climbed out, clean again, her mother sprinkled talcum powder on the girl's body with such rich abundance that she felt like a special dessert.

“My lovely girl,” her mother said. “I will never let you out of my sight again.”

They spent the rest of the morning in Margaret's room, sitting on the floor and playing with Margaret's clothespin family. Margaret had never known her mother to sit on the floor. She concluded that her mother was full of surprises. She told her mother everything about her clothespin family. Her clothespins had names and they were the most beautiful names the girl could think of. *Tulip. Glorious. Snicker-snack.* They were the old-fashioned kind of clothespins, without the hinges, just a single cylinder of wood, with a knob at one end that looked like a head and a prong at the other end that looked like two legs. Her clothespins had deep histories. The girl told her mother about their fantastic adventures. The mother interrupted the girl many times with questions, and she interrupted her with hugs and sighs, too, until the girl felt like the most beloved child in the world. See how grateful the mother is to see her little girl so alive, breathing in and out! What an incredible child! What a wonder of a child! On this day the girl feels so much love pouring out of her mother that she is certain her mother has the power to save her. Soon the girl will come to understand she can't be saved. Soon she will know that what she has done is beyond forgiveness. For the rest of her life the knowledge will be with her, wrapping her in a ropy tangle-braid of grief and guilt. Oh, yes. Guilt is the worst of all. Guilt is the hollow heart of it. Guilt is what keeps the ugliness alive. Guilt will follow her everywhere, two steps behind. Sometimes it looks like a big, long tongue. Sometimes it looks like a bony finger, reaching out. Sometimes it looks like a sad thing weeping in a corner. Never leaving. Always

blaming. Always muttering its stone-words from the corners of rooms, and from the corners of Margaret's soul, and its voice is raspy and insistent, like the drilling of a tooth—

But all the girl knows on this day, as she is playing with her mother on the floor of her room, is the joy of being loved.

“You are the apple of my eye,” her mother says.



# Advent

## Four

**POOR DEER COMES BACK AT DUSK. HER PELT IS DAMP AND** sweaty. Her back is bent. Her neck, twisted. The hem of her blue robe is caked with mud as if she has traveled a long distance to return to me. Her eyes are hard black marbles. Her crown is made of sullen stars. Is she real? Does it matter? She is part of who I am.

Poor Deer came to me when I was small, and scared, and alone, and in need of hope, however fragile, that one day I would find a way to make up for what I'd done. Her hooves kick out at my shins. She nips and hurts. She clings and sighs. She demands justice. She never forgives. *A tooth for a tooth, and a claw for a claw*, she always says. *A life for a life*, she always says.

She leaves scat on the rugs, and cries easily.

She is my oldest friend.

\* \* \*

There were giants in those days. There were resurrections. There were angels. There was Margaret, sitting in a shopping cart with her legs dangling down. Ever since the day of the schoolyard flood, time itself had behaved so strangely. One day time was like a slow stagnant muddy pool of sludge when nothing ever happened. On another day time came in a rush of brittle, dry hard seconds that flew by so quickly that they were gone before Margaret even noticed them. And always somewhere in the future there was something tragic and inevitable, waiting for her. A reckoning. Lurking there. Just days or years away. Margaret could tell she was on the verge of discovering terrible things. Her mother wasn't alert to the

dangers. Her mother was standing a few feet away, blithely comparing two cans of wax beans, one in each hand.

Margaret knew she was too big to be riding in a shopping cart but if her mother didn't contain her then Margaret would wander into unexpected places, like to the back of this supermarket, where she would pass away through a mystic burlap-and-leather curtain, and on the other side of the curtain she would find herself in a cold concrete room with puddles on the floor; and if Margaret got this far without being caught then she could watch the butchers in bloody aprons cut slabs of meat from the big hanging carcasses for a good long time before her mother found her, because to her mother's way of thinking, the store stopped at the curtain with no other place beyond it; or sometimes, for a change of pace, the girl would run out into the parking lot to chase the cars. Ever since the day of the schoolyard flood a wild urge had come over her body to hide itself away inside narrow places, or to hurl itself into dangerous ones.

Two ladies came wandering lackadaisically down the aisle toward Margaret. They were pushing their slow carts in front of them. Sometimes they stopped to put some cans and boxes into their carts. The women were telling a story to each other, and their story began like this: *Ruby was the one who found the girl, or so they say*—and that's when her mother pushed the cart away, very fast, and didn't stop pushing until they were well out of earshot.

Margaret didn't hear the end of the story until she and her mother had come back home. Margaret was playing in the front yard, digging small holes in the dirt with a spoon that she had stolen from the kitchen, and as she played there—aware of her mother who was keeping an eye-bead on her from the kitchen window—it dawned on the girl that the story she had partway heard in the supermarket was now traveling on the wind in her direction and settling in pillowed clumps on the damp ground all around. The afternoon was warm, and every porch had a neighbor or two or three on it, sitting and rocking and looking up at the sky and shouting out their halloos to one another, and giving thanks for the miraculous spring weather—and after they had exhausted all weather-related subjects

they began to stare and point with their chins at the house where that poor girl had been found, and to tell the story to one another one more time.

\* \* \*

Ruby was the one who found the girl, or so they say. Muddy footprints led her there. Her first thought was to wonder why her daughter's face was blue. Only later would she ask herself why her first thought wasn't to lift the girl out or try to revive her but at the time she was thinking with horrible clarity and she could see for herself that it was hopeless. What was in the box had nothing to do with her girl. It looked like a stillborn baby, still in the caul. Soft gray silt covered the skin and clothes all over. The next thing Ruby knew she was standing on the dead-winter lawn outside of the house, with no idea how she got there. Florence was there. Florence was holding her. Florence took care of everything. She called the police.

Florence talked to the officers when they arrived with their sirens off.

The police called the coroner.

"We'll need to do an autopsy," the coroner said briskly.

Ruby nodded. She had stopped crying by then. She was calm, in a way. She answered the officer's questions. There were forms to sign. And then the first thoughts began to hammer at Ruby about all the ways she could have stopped her girl from dying. Each new thought was like a blow to the heart, until Ruby was so punch-drunk that she completely forgot what was happening or what had come before. She couldn't understand why all these people were standing around in the street and in her yard. She forgot to call the girl's father. One of the neighbors must have called him because his truck came hurtling down the street so fast that he almost killed a cat and then he came raging out and stomped over to a huddle of people standing in the street and yelled, "Where is she! Where is my girl!" He tried to rush in there theatrically, to see for himself, but the coroner put up his hand and said: "We're very sorry, sir, but you can't see the body at present. We're still at work in here." Hearing those words—*the body*—

enraged the father so much that he searched out Ruby Bickford in the crowd and when he found her he grabbed her roughly and cried: “You killed her! You killed my baby!” and shook Ruby back and forth until Florence stepped between.

“Back off,” Florence said.

One of the officers strode over.

“Sir, you’ll need to step away from the ladies,” he said.

The dead child’s father wailed and cursed and got back into his truck and drove away.

By this time a gentle rain had begun to fall. It wasn’t enough of a rain to discourage the clabbered lumps of neighbors who insisted on bearing witness to the tragedy unfolding before their very eyes. Their faces kept shifting formlessly from shock to sorrow to blame to excitement. They were afraid to come closer. They were reluctant to back away. It wasn’t until the tiny wrapped mummy came wheeling out and was loaded up and driven off to its next destination that they made their slow way home.

That evening a third-grade teacher named Marcus Blunt happened to be watching the local news with his sore feet propped up on a settle. When he saw a girl’s face flash on the TV he thought: What a lovely child. And then he heard the words. And then he remembered the girl from the morning. The dirty one. The happy one. “Arlene!” he shouted—it was his wife’s name, but the way he shouted it, it wasn’t a name—it was a sound that meant: *I’m dying*—and his wife heard the sense of it and came running from the kitchen still wearing her Playtex gloves and held on to her husband while he cried and shook. The wife kept asking herself: “Why is my husband crying?”—and the husband was asking himself: “What is that terrible sound? Is it me? Could it be me?”—and their two sons came rushing into the room and asked their mother: “What’s the matter with Dad?”—and when Marcus Blunt saw his boys looking so distressed, to see their father behaving in such an emotional manner, he made himself grow silent and rigid and strong again, like a sturdy box.

What about that other girl? The one who lives next door?

That girl? Florence Murphy's girl? That girl isn't part of this story at all—

All this time, as I write these words, Poor Deer has been reading over my shoulder. She leans in. She whispers in my ear. I'm expecting her to tell me I've got the story all wrong again, but she has something else on her mind entirely.

*Time moves sideways through the most important moments of our lives,* she says.

I don't know what she's talking about.

It's more of her nonsense.

## Five

**PENNY AND GLO COME BACK THROUGH THE DOOR OF ROOM 127,** bringing a blast of air in with them, so fresh and cool that I remember there is more to life than arguing with a cud-chewing ruminant. Penny has bought us sandwiches from the Automat across the street. Since there is no table in our room, I sit at the rickety desk to eat, while the two of them eat on the bed. It's egg salad all around. Poor Deer has retreated to her musty corner. For once she has nothing to say. It's been so long since I've met new people that I don't know how to behave or where to put my eyes. Penny doesn't know about my past. She can't see the creature skulking and sighing in the corner of our rented room. I want Penny to like me. I love the way her name is like luck itself, found on a sidewalk, in the shape of a small copper coin. She has a distinctive way of chewing. She takes three wolfish bites from her egg salad sandwich and holds all that grub in her cheeks like a squirrel storing acorns and then she chews the mass slowly, swallowing it down in bits and dribs. I admire her panache. Her daughter Glo, on the other hand, doesn't seem very hungry. She looks at her sandwich disconsolately.

“Eat your food,” Penny says.

Glo touches her tongue to the bread.

“It's too big,” Glo says.

“Take a bite and it will be smaller,” Penny says.

Penny licks her fingers and then she looks at me. Maybe it's just an easy casual look, but I'm feeling sensitive.

“You haven't been out of this room all day, have you?” Penny says.

I tell her I have not.

“You just sat and scribbled?” she says, and when I’m slow to answer she says: “What do you think of that, Glo? Maybe Margaret is the kind of girl who likes to sit inside all day scribbling!”—and her daughter joyously interjects: “Maybe she is hiding from somebody!” and Penny says: “Margaret, are you *hiding* from somebody?” and I don’t know what to say. I’m worried that Penny might be judging me harshly. Also, it might be said that I am hiding from somebody. To say so would not be far from the mark. I wonder how much of my story I’ve given away already—by having no luggage, for instance—but maybe Penny is simply and genuinely flabbergasted at the idea of me sitting inside all day, scribbling.

Glo says: “We’re hiding from somebody, too! We’re hiding from Sam Snickers!”

“We aren’t hiding from anybody, baby,” Penny says. “Now eat your goddamn dinner.”

“Who’s Sam Snickers?” I say.

“Nobody,” Penny says.

Something in the corner has caught Glo’s eye and she slides off the bed and goes over there, moving in that liquid-lightning way children have of moving when something catches their eye, and for a second I’m sure Glo has spotted Poor Deer—or at least a glimmer of Poor Deer—but it isn’t Poor Deer Glo sees over there in the corner. It’s a big brown moth, clinging to the wall.

The girl puts her face right up to it.

“You poor little moth,” she says.

“Are you talking to a *moth*?” Penny says.

“It’s trapped in here,” Glo says. “It’s sad.”

I go over there and give the moth a little nudge with my pinkie finger and manage to cup my hands around it before it flies away completely.

“We’re going to save this moth,” I say.



“Mommy, we’re going to save this moth!” Glo says.

Penny makes a small bark of a laugh and then she reaches for the rest of Glo’s sandwich and starts to eat it. I ask Glo to open the door for me and we go outside. I’m holding my hands together as if in prayer. I can feel the moth’s wings against my palms. We walk all the way to the back of the building, to get away from any lights that might confuse our moth. Glo is walking in step behind me. She has folded her hands like mine. We look like a prayerful procession. Somebody in another room is smoking a pipe and the smell drifts out and makes the air feel thick and slow. I can hear frogs croaking in the dark. I feel so peculiar, because all of it, everything, seems weighty and significant and prophetic. The pipe smell. The frogs. The velvet-soft fluttering of mothwings in my closed hands. This solemn little girl, following. When I open my hands the moth flies straight toward the darkest spaces in the night and disappears.

“She’s free,” Glo whispers.

We look out into the dark.

I feel Glo take my hand.

## Six

**ON THE THIRD DAY MARGARET ROSE AGAIN, THIS TIME TO THE** sound of church bells, and by their manic pealing she knew it must be a Sunday. She ran to the closet and found her best black shoes but she couldn't do the buckles by herself and so she carried the shoes to her mother's door and banged on it. She thought she heard soft crying behind the door but when her mother opened the door she was dressed for Mass, and her eyes were dry. Her aunt came out from her bedroom and asked her mother to help her quick to fasten the clasp on her faux pearl necklace.

“Just lift your hair up for me, dear,” her mother said.

Her mother and her aunt always fastened each other's faux pearl necklaces on Sundays, and they always fasted until it was time for Sunday Dinner. Already that morning they had prepared a huge roast, rubbing it all over with lard and poking it with garlic cloves. They would leave it in the oven to cook at a low temperature, slowly and juicily, while they went to Mass. It was the family tradition on Sundays to leave a piece of meat to cook so they could break their fast in the middle of the day with a special feast. Margaret didn't need to fast. She was too young. The sisters gave her a glass of milk to drink and after she finished the milk the three of them rushed to catch the bus, and when they got off the bus in town, they still needed to walk from the bus stop to the church and they got there with just seconds to spare.

The Mass always plunged Margaret into a frenzy of wonder until it bored her and this Mass was no exception. The priest was an old man with a shiny head. He spoke with God matter-of-factly. Margaret's mother liked to sing out at Mass in her fluttering soprano. Her aunt liked to engage in ardent

conversations with her rosary beads. Margaret liked to swing her legs back and forth and look around. The ceiling soared. The organ sounded. *Mea culpa*, the priest said. *Mea culpa*, the people answered. *Doe-May. Moose. Biscuit.* The people prayed and beat their chests. Just when Margaret lost all hope of ever going home again the people stood up and rushed forward to the altar. Her mother and her aunt rushed up there with the rest. Margaret opened her mother's pocketbook and dug around for a Life Saver, and when she couldn't find one, she put the tip of her tongue on the pew in front. The pew had its own familiar taste, salty and warm. She saw a narrow door in the wall across the aisle from where she sat. She crossed over to the little door and went inside and closed the door behind her. There was no chair, and so she sat on the floor. She closed her eyes and waited for God to come. When nothing in particular happened, she thought she might as well try to go to a better place, the way Agnes had done.

“*None. Some. Dig. Moose,*” she prayed.

Soon the girl felt bewitched by peacefulness. Her throat filled up with dark mutterings, and she heard the sound of splashing and laughing, and she heard the sound of her friend's voice shouting: *Come to me!*—and before long she found herself walking along the palm of a Giant Hand. That is how she thought of God in those days. As a Giant Hand, in whose palm she rested.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the narrow confessional booth, the Mass had concluded and a mother and an aunt were searching for that girl, in the nave, behind the organ pipes, calling out the girl's name in a hushed whisper since they were in church, after all—and once they had searched all of the likely places where a girl might be hiding inside of a church, they rushed out, certain that the child must have already suffered death by car accident. They searched under every car for a little mangled body, and when they didn't find one, they ran across the street and into the Mid-Town Bar, where they interrogated the Sunday-morning drunks all sitting in a row and praying to their beers. Florence demanded an explanation from those drunken degenerates: Had they seen her girl? No, they had not. They shook their slow sodden heads. Their noses

were empurpled. They could barely remember a time of their lives when their own mothers would have looked so frantically for them, and with such love, and the thought of their mothers searching for them, back when they were kids, made them feel so nostalgic that they ordered another round.

All this time the girl dreamed inside a narrow box. By then she had traveled all the way across the Giant Hand, to the very end of its long wide thumb, where she found herself standing in a neat clean room. Sunlight streamed in. An old woman was sitting up in a bed, propped with many pillows, and the bed was surrounded by magnificent bouquets of fragrant flowers.

“You again!” the old woman said. “Quick, show me your hands!”

Margaret held them up.

The old woman laboriously counted the fingers, one through ten.

“Thank goodness, you’ve got all ten of ’em, so maybe it’s not too late!” the old woman cackled. Her eyes were glassy. She looked like an old, floppy doll. She flopped forward in Margaret’s direction and declared, in a voice filled with hope and second chances: “Oh, Lord, Lord, Lord, whatever you girls do, don’t go into that old toolshed! Run away! Run away from there! Run straight home! Run straight to your mother’s arms and tell her to take you quick to feed the ducks!—”

Just then the old priest opened the door of the confessional booth, thinking: No child would ever dare to go inside there—would they?—and found the girl asleep in there, with her mouth open and her body at ease, the way only an innocent child can be at ease. He woke the child as gently as he could by tapping on one knee, and when the girl opened her eyes and looked up at him he felt as if he had encountered grace itself, and it pained him that he didn’t know the girl’s name. He was old and his mind was tired. He knew the mother had been calling this girl’s name out for many minutes, but try as he might, he couldn’t bring the name to mind. Flustered and uncertain, not knowing what else to do, he clamped a wrinkled hand on top of the girl’s head, to bless her. The girl’s mother

ran up. She was so relieved to see her child that she gave her a few light wallops on the bottom. Since they were inside a cavernous church the sound of the wallops echoed and warped, and the people who had stayed after Mass to say some extra prayers all swiveled their heads and looked. The girl's mother stopped walloping. "We'll discuss this more when we get home," the mother whispered, but no matter how discreet the whisper was meant to be, it traveled through that hollow cavernous space, and bounced back from the walls in an exaggerated way, and everyone heard it as a threat. The mother flushed red. She apologized to the old priest in the smallest voice she could muster for the commotion her child had caused. The old priest waved his hand in a gesture meant to convey to this mother that all was well, now that the girl had been found—no, no, not to worry—and after wishing them all a good Sunday he retreated to the sacristy, where he took off his robes and felt the weight of the years settle back into his joints.

\* \* \*

Margaret found herself sitting on the bus between her mother and her aunt. Everything felt strange and new to her because she had just come back from the brink of going to a better place. She looked at her shoes with interest. It was her strong belief that those shoes had just whisked her away to a magical place, step by step. She pondered her journey across the Giant Hand, and she pondered her visit with the old woman who was living at the end of the long wide thumb.

After she had run out of speculations about all these things she bit on her arm and looked out. The road ran along the river and as they came closer to the mill Margaret smelled the familiar smell of rotten eggs, sifting in. The bus stopped, brakes whistling, in front of the mill entrance. The driver waited for the light to change. Margaret watched two skinny dogs just under her window playing tug-o'-war with a piece of trash. Their fur was coated in mud. The light turned green. The bus drove on. Margaret forgot about the dogs. She lost herself in the same old problem that came into her head every Sunday, about who her father was, and whether her father was the man who died in the war, or the old priest with the shiny head, or

God Himself. Her mother said “your father” to Margaret no matter which of those three she meant.

The bus stopped so abruptly that everyone in it was flung forward and back.

Her mother and her aunt stood up.

Her mother shouted: “Come on, Bunny, let’s go! Don’t lollygag!”

The girl followed her mother and her aunt down the tall bus steps. Together they walked home. When they got there Margaret braced herself for more wallops but her mother seemed to have forgotten all about her.

“I’ll check the roast!” her mother declared, and she ran into the kitchen.

“How did you get dirt all over your sweet red coat?” her aunt said.

Margaret looked down at herself. When she saw the dirt on her new spring coat she began to cry. Her coat was cherry red with a matching little hat and her mother said she’d paid an arm and a leg for it. Margaret loved that coat. Now it was ruined for good.

“Don’t fuss, honey, it’s not too bad,” her aunt said.

Her aunt helped Margaret out of her coat and then she got the whisk broom out from its place in the closet and took the coat outside and whisked it briskly, and when her aunt came back inside the coat looked new again. “There,” her aunt said, and she hung the coat in the closet, and put Margaret’s hat on a high shelf where it wouldn’t get crumpled. *Run away, feed the ducks, lollygag*, Margaret prayed. It was a prayer of thanks because her coat was new again.

She went into the kitchen, following her aunt, and crawled under the kitchen table with her aunt’s fairy tale compendium. The book opened in her lap to the story called *The Little Match Girl*.

*It was so terribly cold*, Margaret read.

That was how this particular story always started.

*Her shoes were much too big and they had fallen off in the snow, and her feet were blue and pimpled.*

So many of these stories were about shoes. Wooden shoes. Red shoes. No shoes. Shoes made of silk. Shoes that trod on loaves.

She heard the sound of the refrigerator door opening and closing.

“Dolly, we have got to invite Ruby Bickford over for Sunday Dinner,” her mother said. “It’s the least we can do. We have the roast. There will be plenty to spare. Just think if it had been our Bunny. Maybe we can help Ruby get over the worst of it.”

*The girl had drawn her bare feet under her but she could not keep off the cold, and dared not go home, for she had sold no matches, and could take not even a penny of money home with her.*

“That woman will never get over the worst of it,” her aunt said. “She will never forgive herself. Her mind won’t ever give her peace. For the rest of her life, she will be saying to herself, if only I had done this, if only I had not done that. Her dead child will be the first thing she thinks about in the morning, and the last thing she thinks about at night. That’s the truth of it. If you keep on doing everything for that woman then she’ll be coming over here any time of day or night and crying on your shoulder.”

Margaret’s mother was silent.

“All right,” her aunt said. “We have the roast.”

Margaret’s mother left the house and went next door to collect Ruby Bickford.

“Come out from under there, Bunny, and help me set the table,” her aunt said.

Margaret crawled out and stood up. Her aunt took the fairy tale compendium and put it back where it belonged, by the cookbooks. Then her aunt took down the best china plates from the tallboy china cabinet. Margaret followed her aunt around the table, setting out the spoons by the plates. *China-*

*plates, sweet-red-coat*, she prayed. She could smell the roast. The potatoes were boiling. She put the last spoon in her mouth and tasted the silverplate and took it out again.

“Everyone knows she’s a drinker,” she said.

“You’re a fresh one,” her aunt said.

After they were done setting the table Aunt Dolly took Margaret upstairs and helped her get into her best dress. The dress felt prickly. Her burnt finger felt enormous in her hidden fist. Margaret followed her aunt back downstairs. She watched her aunt wrestle the roast out of the oven and set it on the stove. Her aunt began to make her famous gravy. Her aunt’s gravy-making rituals always transformed her aunt’s perpetually sad face into the face of a happy young girl. Margaret stood spellbound.

Her mother came in through the kitchen door and Agnes’s mother followed.

“Bunny, say hello to your Aunt Ruby,” her mother said.

Margaret had never called this woman Aunt Ruby before. She felt shy. She didn’t say it.

“Welcome, Ruby,” Aunt Dolly said chirpily. “Sit down and I’ll fix you a cuppa. Dinner will be ready soon. We’re having a roast.”

Their guest sat down at the table and took a cigarette and a matchbox out from her long raggedy sleeve. Her fingers jittered as she lit the match. Margaret’s mother found an ashtray and put it on the table in front of their guest. Fantastically their guest was still wearing her old blue robe and slippers. Who wore an old blue robe to Sunday Dinner? Who didn’t know enough to wear her best dress? Margaret’s respect for the woman plummeted. Aunt Dolly put the kettle on the stove. Her mother sat down next to Agnes’s mother and placed a hand on her shoulder and left it there. Margaret watched the three women softly touching and softly consoling one another, in pastel voices. She listened to the sift and flow of the murky pattern in their speech. The hidden meanings of the pattern emerged briefly and just as quickly faded into the



past. Margaret wanted to catch the meanings but they slipped away. Her friend's mother was looking at her. The look she gave Margaret had a rabid shape and color all its own. Margaret couldn't look away.

"That's enough, Bunny," her mother said. "I've told you a hundred times not to stare at people. Now go to your room. I'll call you when dinner is ready."

Margaret left the kitchen but she didn't go to her room. No. She was hungry, and she was angry at her mother for sending her away, and that's why she only went to the top of the stairs where she was out of sight of the women and went no further. She listened to the woman-voices from below. Roast beef with boiled potatoes was her favorite meal and they almost never had it. She heard the clatter of the knives and forks on the plates and knew they were eating without her. Her good dress itched and her burnt finger had grown ever more enormous in her hidden fist. The pain was radiating out from the finger and it was taking up more and more space in her present moments. She wished she had brought her aunt's fairy tale compendium with her but at least she knew the happy ending of the story she had been reading and could recite it by heart—*The little girl flew upwards in brightness and joy far above the earth, where there was neither cold nor hunger nor pain, for she was with God—*

The voices below grew soft and loud and soft again.

Then the voices grew low and dark and sad.

*A beautiful girl, the voices were saying. A beautiful, lovely child. So smart. Whip-smart. Such a child.*

Margaret heard a burst of harsh loud weeping and it scared her, and next came a burst of apologies: *I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, oh, no, honey, no—you gotta cry.*

"I'll just go see what that girl of mine is up to," she heard her mother say.

Margaret ran to her room and sat on the bed, to wait there. Her mother came in. She was carrying a tray with a plate of food on it. Margaret could hear weeping downstairs and her

mother was also weeping. Her mother had brought the weeping upstairs with her.

“Eat up,” her mother said.

She put the tray of food on the bed next to Margaret.

“Aunt Ruby is upset,” she said. “I think it’s best you stay upstairs.”

Her mother went away.

The idea of eating Sunday Dinner on a tray in her bedroom felt wrong to Margaret and instead of eating the food she decided to play inside the closet. She brought her shoebox of clothespins in there with her, for company. She closed the door behind herself because she was interested in the feeling of being inside of something, in the dark, with the lid shut. She wanted to see whether it would take her to a better place. She sat on the floor and picked up her clothespins one by one and spoke to them before setting them back down again. The order in which she spoke to them was important. The way she set them back down in the box was important. She picked up the clothespin she had named *Glorious* and recognized him even in the dark and she could tell he wanted something.

*Applesauce, insouciant, better-eye-out,* she whispered to his little wooden-head.

At once the closet floor grew damp and warm, like boggy-soggy earth, filled with living things. Worms and bugs and other small living things danced across her hands. She made them welcome. She knew she was being a silly-billy—that she was in fact on the second floor of a dry wooden house, and the roof was sound—but it was dark, and she could think what she liked, and when she touched the walls on either side of that narrow place she could feel the blind roots curling up from the new moss that had just begun to grow on those walls, and she could no longer be certain of where she began and where she ended. From below she heard her aunt and mother saying: *Here, honey, take some roast home with you*—and their woman-voices mixed and rose up, and she heard the patterns of the words as if they were a song, or a prayer.

*Such a Poor Deer, what a loss.*

*Take care, plenty to spare.*

The women's voices mixed and ascended.

Her mother's voice was sweet.

"Are you sure, Ruby?" her mother said. "We could make you up a bed. You ought not to be alone. Please stay. I want you to stay. Stay with us. Stay with me."

"Oh, no," the other woman said. "I couldn't do *that*."

"Let her go home, Florence," her aunt said. "The Poor Deer needs her rest."

The mood in the house altered itself so abruptly that Margaret knew the Poor Deer must have gone away. She heard the everyday joyful clatter of dishes being washed in the sink. She heard her mother humming in time with the clatter of the dishes, and before long Margaret heard the lovely, familiar sound of her mother's footfalls, coming closer. She stayed quiet inside the closet even after her mother called for her, because she wanted her mother to open the door and find her, to her great surprise. After Margaret's mother found her, she would say: "Oh, Margaret, I found you!" and wrap her arms tight around Margaret and kiss her many times.

"Bunny?" her mother said.

Margaret was so still.

Her mother opened the closet door.

"What are you doing in there? Again with the hiding! Come out this instant! You'll ruin your best dress!"

Margaret came out. Her mother took hold of her best dress and tried to pull it over Margaret's head—roughly, to signal her unhappiness—but forgot to untie the sash. Margaret heard the rip.

"Now look what I've done," her mother said.

Her mother sat down on the bed and put both hands over her face. Margaret stood nearby, in her underwear and socks. After a while she noticed that her night clothes were in a pile

on the floor from the morning and she sat on the floor and pulled on her flannel pants but she couldn't manage the buttons on the pajama top by herself.

“Come here, funny bunny,” her mother said.

Margaret's mother began to help her with the buttons.

“Do you miss her?” her mother said.

Margaret nodded.

“Oh, Lord, Lord, Lord,” her mother said, and squeezed her, and kissed her on the ear. “Whatever got into that girl to climb inside there to begin with? Poor Ruby!”

“We were playing our game,” Margaret said. “It was the game we were playing.”

She began to explain the rules of “Awake, Oh Princess” to her mother, but before she got very far with her explanations her mother interrupted her by slapping her. Her mother was wearing the ring she always wore with the little diamond on it and the stone caught the corner of Margaret's lip, and she tasted salt.

“You're a very wicked girl and that was a very wicked thing to say,” her mother said. “You were inside the house with me all day! You are never to repeat that awful lie again, do you hear me?”

Small flecks of spittle were on her mother's lips, and her mother was trembling.

## Seven

**AFTER GLO AND I CAME BACK FROM OUR MOTH ADVENTURE I** felt so tired and so confused about how I could have ended up in a rented room eleven miles east of Niagara Falls with two new friends and no plan for what was going to happen next that I excused myself and went into the bathroom and closed the door behind me.

There was a fire in my mind. There was a grief in my spirit. I was grieving not just for the girl I had killed so long ago, but also for many other losses. Some of those losses were new and sharp. I wanted to lie down somewhere soft, and to shut my eyes and sleep forever, but I was feeling very shy about going back out into the bedroom because there was only one bed for the three of us. I'd never slept in a bed with other people. I hadn't expected to meet Penny and Glo. I hadn't planned for them to be staying with me. Nothing about this trip had been my idea, frankly. I could tell by the sounds coming through the wall that Penny and Glo were watching a game show on the television. I decided that, when I went back out, I'd go straight to the rickety desk. I would pretend to stay very busy with my writing. When the two of them were fast asleep I'd lie down quietly on the skinniest edge of the mattress without waking them, and maybe I'd sleep some myself.

When I finally came out of the bathroom, I was overwhelmed by squalor and disorder. Sandwich wrappers were thrown on the floor and the trash can was overflowing and our shoes and coats were scattered all over the place. I began to straighten up but Penny said: "Oh, come on, Margaret, you don't have to do that, come over here on the bed and watch TV!" She made room for me on the bed, patting the

bed next to her, to assure me I was welcome. Why was she so kind to me? I went over there and sat on the edge of the bed. I pretended to be casual about it. Glo curled herself into me and began to use my shoulder for a pillow. Poor Deer had taken on her familiar aspect of pretending to be a pile of clothes in the corner and she didn't interfere. Glo smelled like rain. Penny smelled like Ivory soap. I should have been happy but what I felt was closer to dread, because whenever I'm happy something bad is sure to follow.

## Eight

**AFTER MARGARET'S MOTHER SLAPPED HER AND TOLD HER TO** never repeat that awful lie again a special holy power began to grow inside of Margaret's body, in her chest, day by day, until it was bigger than a breadbox and took up so much space in her and had such sharp metal corners that she could barely breathe, and then a pum-drum-drumming began to pulse through her burnt finger, and soon she could hear singing inside her head, all night and all day, so loud and strong that Margaret could barely hear anything else.

Margaret's mother noticed her troubles. She rested the back of her hand on Margaret's forehead to check Margaret's temperature. Her mother's hand felt unusually cold. It felt like a cold slab of meat slapped across Margaret's forehead. Something had changed recently in her mother's hands. Something had changed in the way her mother's hands tucked her in at night, and the way they woke Margaret in the morning. Something had changed in the way those hands put Margaret's food on the table. Now the bowls and plates would clatter and splash, and her mother's speech was frequently interrupted by small, nervous rages. Sometimes she would hold Margaret tight and begin to cry into her daughter's hair and sometimes she would push Margaret away roughly and without explanation.

Margaret knew that all of these changes in her mother had something to do with the slap, and the taste of salt.

"It could be she's a little warm," her mother said. "What'll we do if she's sick?"

"Check for rash," Aunt Dolly said.

"Lift your shirt up, Bunny," her mother said.

Margaret lifted her shirt up. The two of them leaned and peered. Her aunt pushed her demi-glasses further down her nose. She touched Margaret's chest with the tips of three fingers and her mouth opened, so wide that Margaret could see her gold tooth in back.

"No rash," her aunt said. "So it's not the pox."

"Do you think she might be contagious, Dolly?" her mother said.

Her aunt put her soft, pink-freckled hands on both of Margaret's cheeks. She looked straight into her eyes and thought a moment. Then she smiled and kissed Margaret on the forehead.

"She doesn't feel all that warm to me, Florence," her aunt said. "This girl is fine!"

Margaret knew her mother and aunt were going somewhere special that afternoon, somewhere serious. They had told her she was too young to go with them. They were dressed in their Sunday best even though it wasn't a Sunday. They fed Margaret a tablespoon of castor oil. They rubbed witch hazel on her chest. They asked Margaret if she felt better and she said yes, she certainly did. They dressed her in play clothes and then they walked Margaret down the street, to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Gates and their son, Tommy Junior, and left Margaret there. Margaret was excited to be left with the Gates family because she'd heard the story about how Mr. Gates had come back from the war with shrapnel inside of him and she was eager to see his war wound. Mr. Gates was away that afternoon, though. It was just Mrs. Gates and Tommy Junior. Tommy Junior was six. His head was unnaturally flat on top. Margaret showed him the game she used to play with Agnes, before Agnes had gone to a better place. They pressed their foreheads together and stared into each other's eyes and made the same faces and the same gestures exactly—Who moved first? Which was the reflection?—and then they were friends.

"What happened to your finger?" Tommy Junior said.



Margaret put her hand with the secret burnt finger in her pocket.

“I’m done playing,” she said.

She sat down on the floor next to the front door and waited for her mother to come. Tommy Junior came over. He kicked Margaret’s foot in the fragile hope that a kick would persuade the girl to get back up off the floor and play with him again, but Margaret was unflinching. The boy gave up and went away. A lightbulb blinked in the lamp across the room. The telephone rang from the kitchen wall. Tommy Junior’s mother answered on the third ring and not the second or the fourth. Margaret thought about the way the colors of her burnt finger kept changing. She thought the finger must be part of the pattern or the puzzle that she was trying to figure out.

Tommy Junior’s mother finished her phone call.

“Tommy? Margaret?” she called.

She found the girl first, sitting there by the door.

“What is it, honey? Do you miss your mother?”

Margaret shook her head.

“Do you want a cookie?” Tommy’s mother said.

“No, thank you,” Margaret said.

“Tommy Junior!” Tommy’s mother called.

The boy appeared.

“What did you say to her, Thomas?” she asked him. “Were you *unkind*?”

“She doesn’t want to play with me,” the boy said.

“What’s the matter, honey?” the mother said. “Are you sad about your little friend?”

Margaret shook her head. They left her there. A few minutes later they came back. Tommy’s mother set a plate of cookies on the floor next to Margaret’s knee. She murmured tender words. She and her son retreated back to some other place in the house. Margaret was no fool. She didn’t allow

herself to be distracted by either cookies or tender words. She had work to do. Through fasting and prayer, she was going to make her mother come back through the door. Now that Tommy Junior knew all about her burnt finger, she didn't feel safe in this house.

*Oh, Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord,* she prayed. *Not the pox. What a loss.*

Eventually Margaret's fasting and prayers made a powerful argument in her favor with God, and the doorbell rang, and when Tommy's mother opened the door, Margaret's mother was standing there on the other side of it.

"Oh, Florence, how was the service?" Tommy Junior's mother said.

"Frank behaved himself for once," Margaret's mother said. "I worry about poor Ruby. Poor Ruby isn't herself."

"Poor Deer," Tommy Junior's mother said.

"Poor Deer," Margaret's mother said. "Bunny! What the heck are you doing sitting on the floor?"

"Poor Thing," Tommy Junior's mother said. "Poor Thing just sat here by the door and barely said a word. She must be very broken up about her Poor Friend, Poor Thing."

"That girl hasn't cried a single tear," her mother said. "I don't understand that girl one bit. I call that girl my little changeling child. She's so moody and unique! Bunny, say thank you to Mrs. Gates for taking care of you all this time."

Margaret's throat had just closed up with the taste of dread. She needed to keep swallowing to keep the taste from coming out and she couldn't say a word. Not even "thank you."

Margaret's mother said: "One day you'll need to learn manners or no one will marry you."

"She's a good girl, Florence, she's been awfully good," Tommy Junior's mother said.

Margaret's mother thanked Tommy Junior's mother. Then she and Margaret left the house. Margaret's mother walked

briskly ahead of her, all the way home. Margaret hung back, dragging her feet along.

“Pick up your feet or you’ll ruin your shoes!” her mother said.

\* \* \*

Florence and Dolly never spoke to Margaret about the service. Even so the girl formed a memory of her dearest friend’s funeral, and she would add to the memory, bit by bit, over many hours of private imagining about how it must have been, until the story of Agnes Bickford’s funeral was as solid and real to Margaret as any other memory. Florence and Dolly stood by Ruby Bickford’s side on the day of Agnes’s funeral. They squeezed Ruby’s hands and passed Ruby fresh hankies and held her up by the elbows until it was time to come home again. The dead child’s uncles and aunts and cousins on her father’s side had come, to support the father. Even though these cousins had no emotional tie to the dead girl, being older and from out of town, they paid attention when their parents said: “Let this be a valuable life lesson to you, never to get inside a cooler and close the lid on yourself!” The parents did not spare their children a single gruesome horrific detail about how that girl had died, with her long tongue hanging out, and with clenched toes, and with her spine hideously twisted by the final throes; and the cousins would grow up phobic about closets and coolers and all kinds of small spaces; and for the rest of their lives they would sleep with their doors and windows wide open, to let the air in; and some of them would die young anyway, but none of them, not one of them, would ever die in a cooler.

Frank Bickford—the bereaved father who owned the only hardware store in town—was not a believer. But as it was his only girl who had died, he hired a Baptist preacher to lead the mourners in solemn prayer. He neither gave comfort nor refused admittance to the mother of his dead child, even though it was only natural for him to blame that woman. Everyone said so. Everyone blamed that woman except for a handful of contrarians, the ones who thought maybe the father shared some of the blame for leaving that death trap in the

shed to begin with. No one blamed the Murphy girl. Not even Margaret. She couldn't yet hear the soft incessant grating voice inside her head, growing louder with each heartbeat: *It was you. It was you. It was you.*

\* \* \*

Florence Murphy couldn't stop thinking about the way that little white coffin had looked, so alone and so small and so forlorn—and just as she was tucking her daughter in bed for the night an inspiration came to her and she announced that the two of them would be going to church the next morning to light a candle for the soul of Agnes Bickford. She explained to her girl that every person was born with a precious immortal soul inside of them. If they prayed for the soul of Agnes Bickford then she would be delivered from torment and see God. She said Margaret had a soul, too, and that it looked like a giant white pear inside of Margaret's chest, and just like a real pear Margaret's soul could get bruised. Whenever Margaret sinned her pear-soul got a bruise on it. The bigger the sin, the bigger the bruise, and on and on, until the soul was thoroughly black and rotting.

“Do you understand me, Bunny?” her mother said.

Margaret nodded.

By morning, Margaret was moving in slow, deliberate gestures, the better to avoid bruising her pear-soul.

“Come wash your face!” her mother said.

Margaret followed her mother into the bathroom. As soon as she was standing in front of the mirror she opened her mouth as wide as it would go to see if she could catch a glimpse of her pear-soul. She wanted to know whether the pear inside her was still white but there was nothing to see in there but a black black void.

“Stop clowning,” her mother said. “Close your mouth this instant.”

On the bus to the church Margaret forgot about her pear-soul. She grew preoccupied with her secret burnt finger and the way its colors kept changing. She kept it in her pocket

because it was a secret even from her mother but she kept peeking into her pocket to check on it. At first the tip of her finger had been ashen-white, and then greasy yellow, and then blue lines had begun to creep out from the center like a starburst and to travel up the back of her wrist, and just that morning something new and purple had begun to grow at the tip. It looked like a tiny purple gible.

The church was empty, on account of it being a weekday. It smelled of soot and melted wax, and other solemn things. Margaret's mother gave her a penny and told her to put it in the metal box in front of a plaster statue of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. The penny went straight in and made a clink-sound on the bottom. Margaret knelt next to her mother on a narrow board. She knew what to do because sometimes her mother took her to church to light a candle for her father who died in the war. She watched the flame flicker. She looked up at her mother's face. Her mother's face was glowing in its typical way. She tried hard to pray like her mother—tried so hard that her eyes shut tight—and before long she heard a little voice in her head, and the voice whispered: *Agnes Bickford—Poor Deer*, and when she opened her eyes she was looking straight into the eyes of Baby Jesus nestled up in the arms of his blue-robed mother. The baby's face was chipped. Underneath the creamy-pink paint the true color of the baby's face showed through, and it was the color of soft gray silt. As for the baby's mother, her expression was ambivalent. She might have been smiling. She might have been plotting. She had a wild look in her eye. Her teeth were small yellow nubs of teeth that just peeked out between her ruby-red lips. One of her fingers had broken off.

Her mother crossed herself tidily and stood up.

Margaret crossed herself and stood up, too.

Her mother led her to the front of the church where the two of them knelt once more, this time in front of the bigger-than-life crucifix that was suspended there. Her mother was praying in a peculiar way, with both hands covering her face. Margaret reached over and tried to take one of the hands away. She wanted to see her mother's face again.

“Okay, honey, let’s go,” her mother said.

Outside the church the day was so loud that Margaret needed to squint.

“How about a treat,” her mother said.

Margaret nodded.

Together they walked six blocks to the downtown lunch counter where her mother worked three afternoons a week.

Everybody knew Margaret’s mother. Her mother knew everybody.

Everyone knew Margaret, but Margaret didn’t know any of them.

Her mother ordered two strawberry parfaits for twelve cents each.

“To think the girl died while her mother was there in the house, just steps away,” somebody at the lunch counter said.

“Probably drinking,” somebody else said.

“That’s so unkind,” Florence said. “Her girl is gone. You people don’t have a shred of compassion.”

A contrarian piped up from the end of the counter.

“It’s the father who is to blame, if you ask me,” the contrarian said. “I hear he’s the one who left that death trap in the shed to begin with.”

The contrarian lit a cigarette and waved his match out flamboyantly to signal that his speech was done.

Margaret’s parfait was messy and melting. To tell the truth Margaret was more interested in the spoon than she was in the ice cream or the strawberry glaze. The parfait had come with a special tall spoon that could reach to the bottom of the tall parfait glass and get the last bit out. She liked looking at her upside-down face in the spoon and moving her head back and forth because it entertained her and distracted her from her sorrows.

“Stop playing with your food,” Margaret’s mother said. “Eat up!”

But Margaret couldn’t eat up. She was feeling sick from all the sweetness. She felt so hot. Sweat was trickling down her back and she felt like she might fall right off her revolving stool. Her mother sighed and ate what was left in Margaret’s parfait glass herself, so as not to waste it, and paid the bill. They rode the bus home contemplatively. Margaret bit on her arm and looked out, same as usual. She was thinking many fine things. She was filled with joy and hope because she had prayed for the immortal soul of Agnes Bickford.

Just as Margaret and her mother came walking up the street from the bus stop toward home, Agnes Bickford’s mother came stumbling out of the house next door. She was carrying an armful of dead flowers to the trash can. She looked awful. Her hair drooped. She had barely bothered to gather her old blue robe around herself. Margaret could see a bare shoulder. The woman’s feet were likewise bare. Her toenails were painted.

“Now listen to me, Bunny,” her mother said. “You and I are going to walk right over there and we are going to pay our condolences to your Aunt Ruby. You’re a big girl now. It’s the right thing to do.”

Margaret walked right over there with her mother. Even though she was feeling sick, and even though her burnt finger throbbed, she was feeling special and very pretty because she was wearing her cherry-red spring coat and her matching Easter hat.

Aunt Ruby watched them come.

“How are you holding up, Ruby?” her mother said.

“My girl is dead,” the other woman said.

Margaret felt sorry for her. She looked so sad.

“Your girl’s going to be an angel from now on,” Margaret said. “She’s going to be my guardian angel and she will always look after me for as long as I live.”

“Did your mother tell you that?”

Margaret nodded.

“My girl isn’t an angel, you stupid lump,” she said. “My girl is in the ground.”

“She’s trying to help, Ruby,” her mother said.

The other woman collapsed. Her legs folded up and she sat down on the bare ground. Her robe hiked up. Margaret could see her pale thigh.

“Go home, Bunny,” her mother said.

“No, Florence. I want to speak with your girl,” the other woman said. “I want your girl to explain to me how it came to be that my girl is dead.”

“Oh, honey, she doesn’t know anything,” Margaret’s mother said.

“The last time I saw my girl she was with your girl. They were together.”

“You’re wrong, Ruby,” Margaret’s mother said. “Bunny can’t help you. Bunny was inside with me all morning. She was with me.”

“That makes no sense at all,” the other mother said. “I remember. I think I remember. I think I saw your girl. I think she rang my bell. Your girl didn’t have her coat on.”

“That’s just wrong, honey,” her mother said. “You must be thinking of another day.”

The woman sitting on the ground looked up at Margaret. The woman’s look was simple and open. It made Margaret smile.

“Did you lock my girl in that cooler and leave her in there to die?” the woman said.

“Of course not, Ruby,” her mother said. “Bunny! I told you to go home!”

Her mother gave her a little shove. Margaret went. She could hear the women talking tensely and the pattern of their words attracted her but she didn’t look back. She let herself in through the kitchen door. It smelled like fried eggs inside the



house. Margaret had the strangest feeling in her tummy. It was because of the strawberry glaze, and because of the fried-eggs smell. Agnes's mother said Agnes was in the ground. Margaret's mother said her friend was by her side. Her aunt said her friend was an angel and had flown to heaven. Maybe her friend could fly. Her friend could fly now, probably. Margaret knew all about angels. She'd seen them in cartoons. Angels were chubby cherubs with wings. One sat on each shoulder. One was good, one was bad. They whispered in your ear.

Margaret listened.

She couldn't hear any whispers.

Her friend was in the ground.

Her friend was by her side.

No wonder Margaret couldn't hear anything. No wonder it was so quiet in the house. Her aunt was sleeping. Her aunt needed quiet in the house on the days when she worked night shift at the mill. The strawberry glaze was about to come back out and when it did Margaret would make a choking sound, and then she would cry, and if Margaret made too much noise then her aunt would wake up and give her something to really cry about. Margaret didn't want to make a choking sound that would wake her aunt and so she went out into the backyard, where she was sick behind her aunt's mock orange bush. After she was done being sick she felt better, except for her throat, which was burning, and for her finger, which was throbbing. She decided to check on the little blood-giblet that was hanging at the tip of her finger. It looked bad. It was getting bigger. Margaret bit a little hole in the giblet, to let the bad blood out. As soon as she bit, she regretted it. The pain was new and terrible. She was probably going to die. She wanted her mother. She was afraid of her mother. She was afraid to cry. She didn't want to wake her aunt.

Her mother opened the back door and looked out.

"Bunny! Didn't I just tell you to never go out of this house without asking me?" she said.

After trying for so long not to cry, Margaret did cry. Her cries came pouring forth. She made such a commotion that she woke her aunt, who opened an upstairs window and shouted: “Stop that girl’s caterwauling before I come down there and give her something to really cry about!”

Margaret’s mother began to scoot toward her with angry flashes in her eyes. Margaret had no defense except to take her last chance. She held up her damaged finger. Her finger was her best, last hope. And the look of that finger, so colorful and so ruined, stopped her mother in her tracks. “Good Lord, Bunny, what’s happened to your finger!” her mother shouted, and her mother forgot all about punishing the girl for the caterwauling, and took Margaret inside, and rubbed bacon grease on the finger, to help it heal.

## Nine

FLORENCE WAS SO AGITATED BY RUBY'S WILD ACCUSATION that, as soon as her girl stopped her caterwauling, she ran next door to be with Ruby again. Florence wanted to hold Ruby in her arms. She wanted to comfort Ruby. She wanted to tell Ruby over and over again that Margaret had nothing to do with what happened to poor little Agnes on the day of the schoolyard flood. Ruby wouldn't look at Florence. It was like comforting a stone. Florence kept trying, because she loved Ruby Bickford. She said: *Oh, my dear, dear Ruby, I will never think what those other people think about you, can't you believe me? It was her father's fault for leaving that death trap in there to begin with, please, dear, please look at me, I love you. I love you.* And Ruby just sat like a stone, stiff and cold, not looking at Florence. She was waiting for Florence to say something different from those words. She was waiting for Florence to say: *Yes, you're right, Ruby, it was my girl that did it;* or maybe to say: *I can't be sure, maybe it happened that way;* or: *I wasn't looking after my girl every minute on the day of the schoolyard flood, so I can't really say;* or at the very least she wanted Florence to say: *It could just as well have been my own girl Margaret who climbed in there and died, we all have small moments of distraction when we are too tired or overwhelmed by life to be vigilant, and our children can slip away to somewhere deadly—any mother could have done the same—*but Florence said none of those things. She said other, shallow things. She spoke rapidly. She meant her words to be soothing but what Ruby heard was as cold and hard as a storm of sleet, each word a small piercing ice-stone on her skin—and she hated Florence for it. She hated Florence for not admitting that she didn't know what her child did every minute of every day. And it would be the last time these women ever spoke—

although later, after Ruby went west to live with her brother Everett, Ruby would write to Florence. She would try to make amends. Her letter would begin like this: *Florence, sometimes I remember how we used to be. I wish I could just pick up the phone and hear your voice but I'm so afraid of what you'd say to me. I'm so afraid. I don't know what got into me to accuse your child of such a terrible thing—*

\* \* \*

Dolly was so alarmed by the look of that purple-and-blue finger on her niece's little hand that she couldn't find her way back to sleep no matter how she tossed and turned, and if she didn't find her way back to sleep, then she would be stumbling around on her shift at the mill all night, barely able to make her way through until morning. The mill wasn't a place to be half asleep. She'd seen the accidents. As a last resort she climbed out of bed and came downstairs and got into her favorite wingback armchair and wrapped the comforter around her knees—although the day was warm—and began to read aloud to herself from *The Confession of Saint Patrick*, in a cranky, tired voice, while Margaret—soothed at last, by the bacon grease—played quietly with her clothespins on the coiled wool rug. The only remnants of Margaret's former upset were the small hiccups that kept coming out of her. Florence had gone out somewhere to collect herself. Margaret and Dolly were alone in the house. It was Dolly's habit to come downstairs and read aloud from *The Confession of Saint Patrick* whenever the insomnia hit her. Margaret was very familiar with the first parts of *The Confession* because of her aunt's habit. Her aunt almost always fell asleep just as she was reading the words: *The very same night while I was sleeping Satan attacked me violently, as I will remember as long as I shall be in this body; and there fell on top of me, as it were, a huge rock, and not one of my members had any force.* The words came out ever more slowly from her aunt's lips, and with ever more garbled gurgles in the back of her aunt's throat, and then the book dropped from her aunt's hands to the floor, and Aunt Dolly was softly snoring. Margaret crawled over there to her aunt's wingback armchair, moving across the coiled wool rug on all fours like a friendly lion. She picked her

aunt's book up from the floor. She was in love with, and in terror with, the picture of the horned monster, Satan, crouching on a pale man's chest. The monster on Saint Patrick's chest had both hooves and dugs. Its hooves were cloven. Its dugs hung down. Its teeth were yellowed nubs of teeth, with bits of green between. The story impressed Margaret so much that she woke up in the middle of the night with a terrible weight on her chest as if an enormous rock had fallen on her. She knew it must be Satan himself crouching on her chest. Margaret was afraid to open her eyes. She kept them shut. Then she heard her mother say: "Open your eyes, you silly-billy, it's a beautiful sunny day and it's time to get up!"

Margaret opened her eyes.

She could not believe her good fortune.

Outside, the sky was blue.

\* \* \*

When I opened my eyes, I was in a dark place. I didn't know where I was, and I couldn't remember how I got there. Then I remembered I was trapped in an old cooler. I was running out of air. I tried to bang on the lid but no one came. That was when I realized that I was still dreaming, and opened my eyes. There was no longer a lid above my head. Just a low gray ceiling, with pipes of different dimensions, and it wasn't dark. Small cold lightbulb-stars lined themselves up in a row on that ceiling and stared down at me like all-seeing malevolent eyes, or small gaping mouths, and I couldn't hear my own heartbeat. Poor Deer was there. She was sitting next to the bed on a little stool and her legs were crossed. She was casually filing her hooves with an emery board. Her eyes were red-rimmed, because she had been crying again.

*You would have come to the end of this confession long ago, if you'd only stuck with the truth,* she said.

I told her that what she called the truth might just be something I heard once, in a dream. She wasn't interested in debating me. She just looked at me sadly.

*You know as well as I do what true memories feel like,* she said.

I had to admit Poor Deer was right. Some of my memories are too sharp and real to be anything but true. The taste of a greasy carburetor on the tip of the tongue. The look on a child's face—exuberant, with flecks of mud on her teeth—just before the lid slams down.

And as I opened myself to these most-vivid memories of my life, I found myself back in the cooler again, trapped there, banging on the lid, and screaming for someone to rescue me. I wasn't afraid, though, because some part of me, by then, was wise to my mind's little tricks, and I knew I was still dreaming. I opened my eyes, this time for real. I found myself exactly where I wanted to be, with Penny and Glo sleeping softly next to me, the three of us tangle-legged and a-tumble and holding on for dear life to one another as we dreamed our dreams.

# **A Burnt Offering**

## Ten

**MARGARET'S MOTHER KEPT SPREADING BACON GREASE EVER** more diligently and lavishly not only on Margaret's purple-giblet finger but all the way up to Margaret's elbow, and then further still, because the lines of purple and blue and red had begun to braid themselves upward and to reach toward Margaret's shoulder, and then, to strive for her neck—until a day came when Margaret woke up in a hospital with a doctor's big face looming.

Margaret remembered why she was there. She asked the doctor to give her finger back, because she still had need of it. She asked politely. She used her best manners. The doctor told her in a kindly voice that her finger was gone forever. The girl was speechless. She'd been planning to keep the finger in the shoebox with her clothespin family for safekeeping. It terrified her to think that a part of her was gone for good. Even the bone.

"This girl should be dead of sepsis, Mrs. Murphy," the doctor said. "It's a miracle this girl is still alive. It's a miracle that she only lost the finger, and not her life. This girl should be dead or at best missing her entire right arm and not just a finger. Why the heck you people didn't bring her in at the first sign of infection I'll never know."

"You doctors should learn to stick to your business," Florence said. Her tone was cold because ever since a doctor had misaligned Dolly's jaw for good in a crude effort to repair her broken ruined face, following that unfortunate and fateful golfing accident of her girlhood, Dolly and her sister had avoided doctors, and rarely trusted their advice.

"Our girl is taking it very well," Dolly said. "Poor Bunny!"



The three of them were hovering over Margaret's bed, looking down at her. Their heads looked like three floating balloons. The doctor's balloon-face had a look on it like a clenched fist. Her mother's balloon-face had new purple blotches on it. Her aunt's balloon-face was frozen in her usual expression of perpetual sorrow on account of her girlhood golfing accident. Margaret's missing finger itched. She was afraid to look. She wasn't ready to see the ugly shape she imagined she'd see at the end of her hand. Then she screwed up her courage, and she did look, only to learn that her whole hand was bandaged so completely that it looked like a fingerless club. She thought about what it was going to be like to live with a stump where her finger used to be. She prayed the whole finger was gone, because the idea of a one-knuckled stump that could still move and wriggle on its own, like a blind cave animal, unnerved her. She asked her mother to light a candle for the missing finger, the next time she went to church. "Don't be a silly-billy," her mother said. "You can't light a candle for a missing finger. Fingers don't have souls any more than wild beasts have souls, or kitchen step stools have souls. Buck up. The worst is over."

Her mother and her aunt began to bustle and tuck and to stroke her hair in a way that Margaret could tell meant they were about to say good-bye and leave her there for good. Margaret told them not to go, because she was terrified of what would happen to her if they left her alone.

"You're not alone, Bunny—look at these other children in this room with you!" her mother said. "And not one of them is making a commotion but you!"

Margaret saw it was true. As soon as her mother and aunt stepped back from her little bed Margaret could see three other little beds in the room with her, and each of the beds had a little child in it. Margaret felt kindly toward those little children. She gave one of the children her best smile, but that child wasn't interested in striking up a friendship with a nine-fingered girl, and turned her head feebly away. Margaret's mother and aunt began to leave in earnest. Margaret would soon be left alone with a doctor who thought she should be dead of sepsis, plus three unfriendly children. The doctor

advised her mother and her aunt to leave quickly and without saying good-bye because it was best not to give in to the child's bad behavior. He assured them that the girl was only acting out to draw attention to herself.

Away they went.

\* \* \*

As soon as her mother and her aunt left the room the doctor sedated her. In her haze the girl began to feel very sorry for herself because her finger was gone forever. She kept hearing her mother in her mind's ear, saying: "There's always a price to pay for our sins and follies, Bunny, and you'll be paying that price forever and a day." She kept hearing her aunt's voice in her other mind's ear, saying: "But listen, honey. I will be honest with you. What happened to that girl was out of your hands." By the time Margaret rose even halfway out of her sedated stupor it was dark and the hospital walls were green and glowing. She wasn't surprised to see Poor Deer herself, dressed in blue and sitting in a chair next to Margaret's bed. The creature looked hunched and unhappy. Her face had a long look to it. The monster had both hooves and dugs, and her hooves were cloven.

Poor Deer was crying.

"Quite a fine little trick to get away with what you did to my Agnes," Poor Deer said. "Even if you lost a finger in exchange."

"I don't know why I lost a finger," Margaret said.

Poor Deer leaned forward until Margaret could feel her hot boggy breath on her face.

"You are a wicked, stupid girl," Poor Deer said. "It should have been you who died in that box."

"I'm not a wicked, stupid girl," Margaret said.

But Margaret wasn't sure.

She didn't like the way this dank sad thing was leaning over her and weeping.

“Do you understand what you did? Do you even know what you’ve done?”

Margaret shook her head.

“You killed my Agnes,” Poor Deer said.

Margaret’s feelings grew very large.

“That’s right. You can’t lie to me,” Poor Deer said. “You can’t hide from the truth. You killed my girl. No one else believes me. But I know. God knows.”

Margaret began to sob, because she was frightened of God.

“Shut up, shut up, shut up!” Poor Deer said. “If you don’t shut up then I’ll shut you up for good! I could shut you up for good. I could do it. I swear I could do it. You’re a wicked, stupid clod of a girl. It should have been you in that box. I could do it. I really could.”

Poor Deer began to caress Margaret’s little throat with her hard cold muddy hooves until it felt as if there were no air in Margaret’s lungs and that was all right. Margaret accepted it. She knew it was only fair. A life for a life. She had heard it was that way. She wasn’t frightened any longer. Just sad.

A soft knock came on the doorjamb.

The night nurse leaned in.

Margaret’s lungs filled up with air and confusion.

“Deer, you shouldn’t be here at this hour,” the night nurse said.

The night nurse’s voice was gentle. She thought the poor woman sitting and weeping by the brave little amputee’s bed must be the girl’s mother. She thought she was in the presence of a mother so worried about her girl that she had snuck back into the hospital long after visiting hours were over, to be close to the girl and to comfort her.

“You’re right,” Poor Deer said. “I shouldn’t be here.”

Poor Deer kissed Margaret on the forehead.

“You’ll be seeing me,” she whispered in Margaret’s ear.

Poor Deer walked out into the night.

The nurse let the woman go. She understood how mothers could be. She walked over to Margaret's bed to check on the girl. As she did so she absently touched the jagged scar on her chin, left over from the time she had soared over the handlebars of her bicycle and landed chin-first on the sidewalk. Her mother had come running. Seeing this brave little amputee in the bed, looking so forlorn and so small and so alone, the nurse thought back on the day when her own mother had comforted her and loved her after her bicycle accident. She wanted to do the same for this girl.

"Don't cry, honey, your mother will be back to see you very soon," she said. "It's going to be all right! By tomorrow morning you'll feel better! Everything is always better in the morning, I promise!"

Margaret decided to believe the nurse.

Everything would be better in the morning.

Her friend would come back from a better place.

Her mother would love her again.

\* \* \*

After such a wild night Margaret wasn't expecting to wake up in the same hospital, in the same bed, in the same mood and with the same bandage wrapped around her hand. Just outside the door Margaret could see the same hospital corridor filled with nurses and doctors and people with messy hair sitting in wheelchairs and being pushed along. She could hear the same sound of telephones ringing. Even the air smelled the same, of bedpan and moldering flowers. Two of the little children were fast asleep in their beds with the soft humps of their bodies under the blankets rising and falling. The third little bed was empty and made up neatly. The day nurse came in. Margaret didn't know her.

"You're awake!" the day nurse said.

She looked at Margaret's chart.

“You’re coming right along!” the day nurse said, and went away.

An hour later Margaret’s mother came gliding into the room and sat down in a slump. She rummaged around in her pocketbook for a cigarette and when she couldn’t find one she took out an emery board and began to file her nails.

Margaret asked her mother if she had any good news about Agnes Bickford.

Her mother stopped filing her nails. She looked at Margaret strangely, and even with contempt, and then she shouted hoarsely: “Agnes Bickford is dead, you stupid girl!”

The day nurse poked her head in to see what the fuss was about, and went away.

Margaret was astounded at her mother’s news. She fell into a flummox. She had been visited by the Poor Deer in the night, and the night nurse had promised her that everything would be better in the morning, and in spite of these happenings it seemed everything was the same as it ever was. Her mother put the emery board away and dug in her pocketbook again until she found a crushed, nearly empty pack of bent Chesterfields at the bottom. She lit one in a hostile way and waved the match out. Margaret felt her stomach cramp up. The taste in her mouth had become so peculiar. She thought it must be the taste of death itself. “Agnes Bickford is dead, you stupid girl!” she said in a whisper, many times in a row, while gently touching her lips with the unbandaged hand, because she wanted to get used to the sound and shape of those words in her mouth. Her mother was swaying in her seat as if rocked by a small earthquake.

“Mommy?” Margaret said.

“Your Aunt Ruby went west,” her mother said. “She packed up and left without a word. She’s gone to live with her brother. Just before she left she told all the neighbors an outrageous story about you, Bunny. To think I ever loved that woman.”

Florence snapped her mouth shut. She couldn't believe she'd said the word *love* out loud, in front of her girl. She began to imagine all sorts of nonsense. She couldn't help but feel angry at her girl for stirring up such strong emotions in her. She spent a long time staring at her knee. She wanted to ask her daughter a question. But she didn't want to. She tried to keep the question to herself but it forced its way out through her lips because she could not help herself.

“Did you leave Agnes Bickford in that cooler to die, Bunny?”

The girl in the bed shook her head vigorously, because she remembered her mother's command never to repeat the awful lie again.

## Eleven

**THE BRAVE LITTLE AMPUTEE STAYED IN THE HOSPITAL** eleven days, long enough for the nurses to adopt her as their mascot. The nurses gossiped and fretted among themselves about how the mother had never come back to visit her daughter except for once or maybe twice. The nurses tried their best to fill the void by teaching the girl silly riddles and magic tricks. It wasn't until the day Margaret was meant to go home that the mother appeared suddenly in the doorway of her daughter's hospital room. Florence had come reluctantly. A little seed had planted itself in her head by then about what might have happened on the day of the schoolyard flood and the seed was sprouting swiftly and growing strong toxic roots and knotty vines. When she came into the room and saw the stump on her girl's hand where a finger used to be she instantly thought of Cain and his mark. She couldn't help herself. The fact of the child's finger stump mixed in her mind with her horror about the death of the girl next door, and the loss of her friend Ruby Bickford, and she was left feeling perplexed and irritable and barely able to kiss her girl hello. The nurses presented Margaret with a little baby-doll dressed as a nurse, with a white uniform and a big red cross on her cap. All of them had signed a card that had the word "COURAGE!" written on it in bold letters. Two of the nurses lifted Margaret into a wheelchair, even though a wheelchair wasn't needed—Margaret's legs were fine and strong—and took turns pushing Margaret along the long corridors to the entrance of the hospital while singing "For She's a Jolly Good Fellow" in their most cheerful voices until Margaret felt like a princess being wheeled along in a golden carriage.

And then it was over, and Margaret was a plain girl again, riding home in a bus, with her mother sitting beside her.

Margaret looked at the empty space where her finger used to be.

She tried to make sense of it.

“Cat got your tongue?” her mother said. “Have it your way, then.”

Her mother said no more. But Margaret could hear her mother’s silent thoughts as clearly as if her mother had been saying them aloud. “If only my dear little stillborn baby had lived,” her mother was thinking, “then I would gladly give up this girl in exchange. If only that dear, first little girl—my pure, good, dead little baby, had stayed with me instead of flying away to limbo and leaving me with this other, changeling girl to raise, then my life would have turned out for the better.” Margaret decided not to give in to her mother’s pessimistic mind-wanderings. What her mother needed was a good hug around the middle. Once they were home Margaret flung her arms around her mother and squeezed but her mother felt unnaturally stiff to her. As for Florence, she felt as if she had just invited a small feral thing into the house. After eleven days of sponge baths, a pungent musky smell rose up from her daughter’s little body and it mingled poorly with the cedarwood and rose petal scent of Florence’s sachets. Her daughter’s eyes kept darting around excitedly like the eyes of a small burrowing animal intending to build a nest. It pained Florence that she was feeling such harsh and unmotherly feelings about her own daughter. Her tender, motherly feelings had been hollowed out by recent events. Her heart was like an ancient crater long after the meteor had hit.

Dolly came flying down the stairs.

“Sorry we woke you, dear,” Florence said. “Bunny, say hello to your aunt Dolly.”

When the girl stuck her finger in her mouth—one of the remaining fingers from that hideous, four-fingered hand—Florence slapped it away.

“What’s the matter with you?” she said.

“Happy day, our girl is home again!” her sister crowed.



Her sister looked genuinely moved in a way Florence was not. Dolly kissed the girl's face many times with tears in her eyes and did all the things that a mother should have done.

“Welcome back, honey,” Dolly said.

Florence remembered herself. She kissed her girl on the cheek.

Dolly had baked a Red Devil Cake for the girl's homecoming and it had come out splendidly. Dolly sat down next to Margaret at the table. She couldn't stop petting Margaret and smoothing her hair and smiling and whispering soft things. Margaret's hair was so dirty that Florence didn't know how her sister could touch it. All around town Florence had kept hearing the small seed of the story that Ruby had planted, just before she went west to live with her brother Everett. Florence kept hearing the story whispered in grocery-store aisles and church pews and even at the lunch counter where she worked, until it felt to her as if her memory—as if reality itself—were being warped by her fears, and as if true events were being altered into stories that were strange and untrue. Her sister was hugging the child. Florence watched Dolly kiss Margaret on the forehead and cheeks and then Dolly even took the girl's maimed hand into both her hands and kissed and kissed the little stump where a finger used to be.

“I made this cake especially for you,” Dolly said. “How about it?”

Dolly cut a big slab of the cake for Margaret, and one for herself. Florence said she didn't want any and she shuffled off and made her way upstairs. A minute later, Margaret heard the sound of the television in her mother's bedroom, sifting down through the floorboards.

“A little dry, maybe,” her aunt said. “The flour wasn't the best. The icing makes up for it, a little.”

When they were done eating cake Margaret helped her aunt wash and dry the dishes and then she went upstairs to her old room. Everything looked different. The bed had a new blanket on it, and the light was wrong. When she found her

shoebox, it was empty. Empty! Where was the clothespin family? Had her mother put Margaret's clothespins back out on the clothesline with the others? Margaret rushed downstairs and ran outside to the clothesline. By their distinguishing marks she found them all. When she found the clothespin she'd named *Glorious*, she cried as hard as if she had just been reunited with a friend come back from the dead, and she brought *Glorious* and the others inside the house, and for the rest of their days she honored those clothespins, and cherished them, and loved them in all the ways they deserved.

\* \* \*

Florence woke in the night, startled from sleep by the conviction that her unmotherly thoughts about her nine-fingered daughter could be vanquished through the power of prayer. She scrambled out of bed and fell to her knees. She was clutching a small metal crucifix in her hand. The crucifix had belonged to her father. He had kept it in his hand whenever he prayed, rubbing his thumb along it so that by the time he had died the face of Jesus was a shiny blank. Florence slept with it under her pillow. She was trying to pray correctly, but the very prayers she was repeating, these words she had repeated all her life—*Holy Mary, Mother of God*—sounded wrong to her. She recoiled from them. A new and shifting and terrible and heretical thought came to her—that it was *Mary*, and not her boy, who had suffered most. *Mary*, after all, had no special powers. She was an ordinary woman who had been forced by God to give birth, and then forced by God to watch her boy die. Instead of smiling through soft tears when she saw her boy taken down from the cross, she should have thirsted for justice. Any mother would. She should have acted like *Judith*. She should have made her secret way in the night to Pontius Pilate's castle and crept into the chamber where he slept and chopped his head off with one mighty stroke of her sword!—and Florence was so upended by these wild violent thoughts about the Mother of God that she decided she'd prayed enough for the time being. She got up from her knees without crossing herself. She walked across the hall and into her little girl's bedroom. Soft dawn had come, and the girl, asleep and snuggled in her little iron bed, looked radiant. The

girl was making small clucking noises with her lips in her sleep as if suckling from her mother's breast and the sound warmed Florence's heart, even though her girl had been bottle-fed. But then the girl in the bed opened her eyes, and Florence's warm and gentle feelings left her, and some other kind of feeling entered in.

"Come have your breakfast," Florence said.

When they were downstairs in the kitchen the girl pointed at the Red Devil Cake.

"Cat got your tongue again?" Florence said.

She thought she'd said it gently but the girl tensed. Florence was trying. She was disturbed by her child's stubborn, punishing silence. Her child looked sullen, even angry.

"Snap out of it," Florence said. "You're home, now. You're safe."

She cut a big wedge of the cake and gave it to the girl.

"Go on, eat up," she said.

Margaret tried to eat but the cake was stale. She missed the nurses. She poked at the cake with her fork and then she went back upstairs and got back into her bed, to hide there. Soon she heard her aunt coming through the kitchen door, back from night shift at the mill. She heard the familiar sound of water in the kettle, whistling. Her mother and aunt were about to have their morning coffee together, and after morning coffee, her aunt would come upstairs to go to sleep.

Their voices floated up, same as always.

"What if she did it?" her mother said.

"I don't think that is a helpful thought," her aunt said.

"I swear I don't know if that girl is wicked or just slow," her mother said.

"She is who she is," her aunt said.

"She isn't speaking to me, did you know that?" her mother said.

“Stop torturing yourself, Florence,” her aunt said.

“That girl shows no remorse, Dolly. Absolutely no remorse!”

“You told me yourself that she was home with you all morning. Why should she show remorse? What for?”

“I don’t know, I just don’t know!”

“Well, make up your mind. I’m going to bed. If you go out then try to remember to buy me some cigs.”

\* \* \*

It began to rain and never stopped. It rained so long and hard that the roads got buried in soft slurry silt. The cars slid off. Water and muck ran into neighborhood basements. Frogs and snakes and salamanders washed up into the hedges and even into the lower limbs of trees, and they stayed in the trees even after the waters receded, because they sensed those dangerous waters would come again. Sludge was seeping into the everyday lives of the people, with mindful malevolence. Mud oozed up from the garden beds and flowed into the roads and drives, and the storm drains backed up and made ponds on every street corner. TV shows kept getting interrupted by the special bulletins about sinkholes that were swallowing homes in the east, and the south, and the north and west. Ancient aquifers filled to overflowing. All night long and every night Margaret listened to the drip, drip of the stuff forcing its way through cracks in the walls. Floors warped and buckled. The house smelled as if they were living at the bottom of a septic well. Black mold spots formed on the baseboards and came back the next day no matter how diligently her aunt and mother scrubbed them away.

Margaret spent her days in her closet, sitting cross-legged on the floor and playing serious games. She played with her clothespin family, and she played with pencils. She lined the pencils up like small signs-of-crosses and spoke the right words in a row.

In spite of Margaret’s best prayers, the sludge seeped into her mother’s mind. Whenever her mother spoke to her,

Margaret could see muck and ooze squeezing out between her mother's teeth. Her mother would try to say *pick up your shoes* but what she'd say instead was *pickup-ya-muck, you—ooze*. Her mother would try to say *you don't even miss her, do you?* and what she'd say instead was *you-ooze-shmooz, oozy lose*. Her mother would try to say *I can see you don't really care*, and say instead: *dirty pear, dirty pear, dirty pear*. Her mother's sludgewords hit Margaret straight in the face and then they oozed down her neck and made their slow cold way under her collar, and under her skin, and then those sludgewords oozed right into Margaret's soul and stayed there.

If only the girl could find the way to untie the ugly knot between her and her mother but she never could. She remembered a time when her mother would kiss every little scrape and bump and cut to make it feel better. Now when Margaret fell down her mother stood apart imperiously and said: "Buck up, it's nothing to cry about!" and that was that.

The days kept happening.

The world kept turning.

Margaret made up stories in her head.

In May Ruby's ex-husband sold his hardware store to a man named Grubb, a man who was famously building a Hardware Empire from South to North and who put up billboards featuring his big manly face all along the highways and byways and above the door of every one of his hardware stores.

Ruby's ex-husband, like Ruby before him, moved away. To Tampa, they say.

In June Margaret's birthday came and passed.

"Five years old!" Aunt Dolly said. "What a big girl! In the fall you'll be going to school!"

In an instant the girl fell into a quagmire of never-ending sludge-thoughts, to think that she, Margaret Murphy, would be going to school in the fall, and Agnes Bickford would not.

In July she found a little dead bird in the weeds, so small that it fit in the palm of her hand. The bird was stiff but its

feathers were soft. Margaret took the bird inside the house with her and nested it carefully inside of her shoebox where she kept her clothespin family and she closed the lid. When Margaret opened the lid in the morning the bird's body was a commotion of swelling and singing, because the ants had found it. She carried the precious living body outside and left it under her aunt's mock orange bush. By the end of the week its bones were bare and white and its eye-sockets in the little skull looked enormous, deep, and wise.

At the end of July, a French-Canadian family moved into the empty house next door. The father worked day shift as a mechanic at the mill, and his grown son worked the chipper, and the mother in that family stayed home with her three little girls and looked after them. Aunt Dolly ordered Margaret to make friends with those girls, but the mother next door took one look at Margaret's missing finger and shut the door. She'd heard the stories. The French-Canadians painted the house a tasteful forest green. They tore down the old toolshed in the backyard and planted a pear tree in its place. They owned a dog named Bruno and they left that dog tied up in the yard all day, rain or shine. At least once a week the dog would somehow slip through his collar and go running off, and for days the neighborhood would be filled with the cries of the family, pleading for their dog to come back—*Bruno! Viens-icitte! Il est où cet esti de chien!*—until the dog came home with a rabbit in its jaws and a wild look in its eye.

And then in September—on Labor Day itself—some other child in town died recklessly after diving off a bridge and breaking his neck in the too-shallow river below. For everyone else in that town, the story of the girl who died in a cooler stopped being a current event, and became a cautionary tale, nearly a fable, about something that happened long ago.

For Margaret, though, the story of the girl who died in the cooler stayed as vivid as yesterday. Sometimes she could hear her dead friend's voice calling out to her from the ecstatic, empty silences once heard by the saints. *Come to me*, her friend would say. Whenever Margaret looked at the empty space where her finger used to be, she couldn't help but remember the wild insouciant girl who had thrown herself

back into the mud. She remembered the way her friend's hair had spread itself out on the clotted surface like a muddy, golden fan, and she remembered how happy she and her friend had been, on a day that had felt like the first spring day of their lives.

A day that had begun so gloriously deserved a happy ending, and Margaret thought up ever so many happy endings for the day of the schoolyard flood, for the sake of her friend. She wrote her happy endings down in her made-up, secret ciphers. She kept them in the shoebox with her clothespin family. In some of her happy endings she rescued Agnes just in time. In some, the two of them ran home on the day of the schoolyard flood, and they never stepped foot inside that old toolshed. In the best of endings of all, those glory-girls ran straight into the untended woods, and they didn't stop running until they came to the Land of the Pirate King, where they joined his motley crew, and spent the rest of their lives sailing the seven seas under the skull-and-crossbones flag.

Her mother would say: "Look at her now, Dolly! Pretending she can write!"

And still no one explained the word *dead* to her.

Margaret filled the gaps in her knowledge with bits of her religious training plus gleanings from her aunt's fairy tale compendium. When her mother told her that Agnes Bickford had *gone to a better place*, she imagined her friend had gone to live somewhere splendid and maybe even a little magical, like a glass castle on a hill. When her aunt told her that Agnes Bickford had *passed away*, she thought Agnes must have parted the air in front of her like a curtain and slipped away to the other side, where wonder lived. When she remembered how Ruby Bickford had told her Agnes was *in the ground*, she knew a girl like Agnes would have adventures under there, and that on the third day Agnes would come back out of the ground again, with three bags full of buried treasure. Margaret believed in these things because of who she was. She believed in them because they were true. By then she could feel Agnes everywhere, and all around—not the same as before, but alive. Agnes sat on her shoulder like a little angel. Agnes shouted to

her from the back of a barking dog's throat. Agnes sang to her from the beak of the birdskull that lived under the mock orange bush in the yard. Agnes walked along with her, everywhere she roamed, playfully disguising herself as Margaret's own shadow.

At night Agnes crept inside of Margaret's body, and there she would rest, like a young girl resting in a tiny boat, made from a tulip petal, and with cats' whiskers for oars.

*I love you, Agnes would say—*

Poor Deer snuffs and snorts and guffaws and paws the floor with one cloven hoof.

*All the pretty lies in the world won't save you this time. A life for a life. You will pay soon enough.*

Poor Deer's voice is spiked with ice-edged prophecies.

Margaret throws the pen at the wall and covers her ears with her hands.



# Resurrections

## Twelve

I'D ASKED ONE OF THE CLEANING LADIES AT LITTLE IDA'S Motor Lodge about whether I could get more hotel stationery. I made it known to her that I would need a great deal of it. I thought she'd forgotten, but in the morning I found a big box of it outside room 127, yellowed and brittle and no good for letter-writing but fine for my purpose. I hauled it inside and took some paper out of the box, and I wrote on. Glo came over and stood next to me and watched me write. After a while she asked if she could have some paper, too, because she wanted to draw. I said sure. We found a second pen. I made a space for her on the rickety table. Most of Glo's pictures were of moths with smiling faces. Before long, though, she crumpled up her pictures and threw them on the floor.

"Why did you do that?" I said. "They were nice."

Glo didn't say anything. Her mouth was half open. I could see her small baby teeth. She looked ready to cry but she didn't. She might have been missing her mother by then. When I woke up that morning, Penny was gone, and she hadn't left a note. I kept thinking she would be back any minute but the minutes kept passing and now it was afternoon. Glo was staring at the door, as if trying to conjure her mother coming back through it. I knew that trick. She looked so miserable. "I'm sure your mother will be here any minute," I said, but Glo was no dummy and she knew I had no special insight about when her mother would come. Her face settled into a stony and unforgiving scowl. Then I remembered the vending machine I'd seen out by the laundry room and I asked Glo if she wanted to buy something out of it.

"Okay," she said hopelessly.

“Okay,” I said.

The two of us walked down to the vending machine and stood in front of it, considering our options.

Glo pointed to the Wax Bottles.

“A fine choice,” I said.

I handed her the coins and she put them in the slot. She liked the heavy heft-and-chunk of the knob when she pulled it. I bought a Slo Poke for myself. We didn’t go straight back to the room, still so empty of Penny. We stood where we were. We tried to take up as much time as we could, by ripping the wrapper ever so slowly, and taking the tiniest bites possible, until Penny came rushing up from somewhere and hugged Glo and spun her around.

“Hey, there!” Penny said.

“I got Wax Bottles!” Glo said.

“Where were you?” I said. I hadn’t meant to say it. My voice sounded full of muddy grievance.

“Miss me?” Penny said. “Oh, no, don’t be that way, Margaret, look, look here, I brought you something!”

She dug in her pocket and handed me a book of matches, from a place called “The Brave Buccaneer.” Glo began to jump up and down in that special jittery way children do just after they have been set free of their forebodings. I tried to stay angry at Penny but I couldn’t. Penny was here. Penny was glowing. I tried to think of the right words for Penny, so I could write them here—*free-and-easy*, maybe, or: *worldly-wise*—but none of the words I came up with was exactly right.

## Thirteen

ON A SEPTEMBER MORNING, WHEN THE SKY WAS AS GRAY AS the loveliest soft cloud, Margaret's mother woke her and told her the time had come for her to walk across the schoolyard and into the school building on the other side. Margaret didn't want to go. She was certain Agnes Bickford was in the ground, under the schoolyard, ready to reach up and grab her by the ankles and pull her under. She ran as fast as she could to the other side. Once she got there her thoughts were taken over by another terror: that a man named Blunt would see her at this school, in a hallway or a classroom or on the playground, and would tell everyone her secret. At recess she climbed high on the monkey bars where Agnes could not reach her. From above she heard two teachers tell a story to each other about the former third-grade teacher, Mr. Blunt. Last spring he'd begun to show up drunk and unkempt. Scaring his students. Crying in the classroom. For his own good he had been put on hiatus from the teaching profession and now he spent his days on a stool in the Mid-Town Bar.

As for Margaret's kindergarten teacher, Miss Rudnicki, the most remarkable things about her were the perfectly round dots of rouge she wore on each cheek. The next most remarkable things were her face-wrinkles. The final most remarkable things were her enormous bosoms. Miss Rudnicki was no dummy. It didn't take her long to notice how the nine-fingered girl in this year's class, instead of using her crayon as instructed to draw circles and squares, was filling her construction paper with mysterious repeating ciphers.

"What's this?" she asked the girl.

"I'm writing a story," the girl said.

It moved the kindhearted teacher that this dull-eyed girl was working so hard to make something happen on a piece of paper, something that looked like writing, and she remembered why she had become a teacher in the first place. It wasn't just because no one had wanted to marry her. It was also because she had felt a calling. She was remembering the calling now, like a distant dream.

“Would you like to tell your story to me?” she said. “Because I'd love to hear it.”

“All right,” the girl said. “It's a story called ‘A Girl Who Went to Sea.’”

“That sounds like a very good name for a story,” Miss Rudnicki said.

“It begins like this,” Margaret said. *There once was a girl who went to sea—*

\* \* \*

There once was a girl who went to sea. She left her friend behind. A storm came. Her little boat was tossed and rocked. The girl fell into the sea and almost drowned, but she didn't drown, because at the last second she was saved by a friendly fish who brought her back to shore. All this time the girl's friend had been searching high and low for that insouciant girl. The friend found the girl where the friendly fish had left her, on a stony shore with the briny waves lapping at her ankles. “I was afraid I'd lost you forever!” the friend scolded. The girl who had been lost tried to thank her friend for finding her there on that stony shore. But the fish had taken her voice away in payment for his good deed, and the girl could no longer say a word.

\* \* \*

The child looked up from her gloopy scrawl. The way this child had recited her little story—so solemn-eyed and serious and all the while moving her somewhat grimy leftover stub of an index finger across her pretend-letters—affected Miss Rudnicki deeply. What was the story behind that finger? A vicious dog attack? A careless mother chopping vegetables in

the kitchen, not seeing the little hand come reaching to steal a piece of carrot before it was too late? It seemed to Miss Rudnicki that all the sadness and violence of the world were reflected in that small hand.

“That’s a very good story,” Miss Rudnicki said. “That’s a remarkable story. I think you must be a remarkable little girl to have told that story so well.”

“Thank you,” Margaret said.

“That such a small girl could have such a capacious understanding of how to tell a story,” Miss Rudnicki said.

“Thank you,” Margaret said.

“Tell me, dear—do you know what the word *capacious* means?”

“It means capable of containing a great deal,” Margaret said.

\* \* \*

On the way home Margaret decided Agnes was in heaven, the way her aunt Dolly supposed, and not in the ground under the schoolyard. Her change of thinking came about because her teacher had just called her *remarkable*. The word gave Margaret an optimistic outlook. She said the word many times in a row—*remarkable, remarkable*—until the word persuaded her to have faith that her friend was a happy angel up in heaven. Agnes would never harm her. Margaret knew that now. As she walked toward home she smelled the acrid smell of burning leaves in the air and it reminded her of winter coats. A fuzzy flock of birds was flapping in a slow circle above her head and she remembered she’d seen those same birds before, on some other day, and because her heart was full of faith, she knew for a fact that these birds were a sign unto her. When the birds veered off on their silver-tipped wings and funneled down and disappeared behind some trees she knew that she was meant to follow. She began to walk in that direction, keeping her eye fixed where she had last seen the birds, and making her way intrepidly through the untended woods, looking neither right nor left. When she came through the trees

to the other side, she found herself in a potato field. Across the field was a little man. He was standing next to a house so small that it came no higher than the little man's shoulders. The man was holding a long pole. Whenever one of those flocking birds landed on the little house the man herded it gently through a window with his pole. The man was whistling. He was puffing out his cheeks. The man's puffy cheeks along with Margaret's natural curiosity made her rush across the field in his direction, so fast that she startled the birds that had not yet been herded inside the little house, and they flew up and scattered themselves.

The little man said: "Gently, gently!"

Margaret couldn't tell whether the man was speaking to her or to the birds. But she made herself small and quiet. She squatted down close to the ground and waited. It had been a long time since she had found herself inside a story as delightful as this one. One by one the birds came back, plopped their big bodies by the open window of the house, and let the man push them gently inside with his pole.

When the birds were all inside, the man latched the window shut.

He looked at the girl.

"My beauties," he said.

"Do those birds live in that little house?" Margaret said.

"It isn't a house. It's a loft," the man said.

After such a hopeful beginning Margaret didn't know how to sustain the conversation. Neither did the man. He was an old Belgian with jowls. His only remaining connection to his home country was his love of homing pigeons. His name was Maarten De Smedt. Years ago he had given up speaking to other people, to be with his birds. The silence between them felt entirely comfortable because they were unusual people but eventually the girl remembered where she was meant to be and she went back across the field, hopping and darting like a little goat.

When she got home her mother looked perplexed.

“Your teacher wants to meet with me,” her mother said. “What have you been up to on your first day of school? And where have you been? I called and you didn’t answer.”

The words had a terrible sickening familiarity to them both. Instantly they both began to think back on the day of the schoolyard flood, a different day when the mother had called for the girl, and the girl hadn’t answered. Margaret was afraid to look at her mother. She was sure her mother’s face would be filled with horror and disgust. Maybe if Margaret had looked then she would have seen she was mistaken. Maybe she would have seen a mother who was trying very hard to forgive. But Margaret didn’t look. The chance was lost.

\* \* \*

The next day Margaret followed the birds through the woods to the potato field on the other side. She was steeling herself for disappointment. She had convinced herself by then that the little man was no more real than one of her made-up stories. But there he was, real enough, standing next to that little house and whistling and carrying his long pole, the same as yesterday—although like many true things, he seemed strangely out of place.

Margaret stood, a little apart, and watched the birds circle.

“Homing pigeons,” Maarten De Smedt said.

The girl nodded.

“My beauties find their way home from impossible distances. San Francisco. Antwerp. In the war they carried messages back and forth. They were the Allies’ secret weapon.”

“Can they fly to heaven?”

“Of course,” he said. “Easy-peasy.”

“Can they carry a message to my friend?” the girl said.

“Of course. My beauties can do anything. They are champions.”

The girl began to speak in a lispy rush of words that made no sense to Maarten De Smedt. He gathered that she was



reciting her message for somebody in heaven, for him to tell a bird in turn. He was not fond of English. But he enjoyed the sound of her little cracked voice and when she was done with her fever-speech he told her that in the morning he would send his fastest bird to deliver the message.

“Why wait until morning?” she said.

“It’s a very long trip,” he said. “That bird will need to fly all day and all night to make it to heaven before dark. Who knows. It might take many weeks or months, depending on the weather.”

She seemed delighted with his answer. She went back in the direction she had come.

When the girl came to visit him a third time Maarten De Smedt taught her how to hold one of his beauties. The bird in Margaret’s hands was the color of wet brick. It cocked its head and looked up at her with one yellow eye. Margaret looked back. The conversation between girl and bird went on like this for some time. The bird was warm, and its feathers were soft, but underneath the softness that bird was tensely muscular—it was fighting to get free—and when Margaret opened her hands the bird flew up on a high perch and began to preen.

“You got good hands for the birds,” Maarten De Smedt said.

He had noticed her mangled hand by then, the result of some violence in the girl’s past, and he felt warmly toward the child, because he had a cauliflower ear.

\* \* \*

Florence’s first impression of Miss Rudnicki was that she had too much rouge on her cheeks. Miss Rudnicki looked all the more ridiculous because she was broad-hipped and the chairs in her classroom were for five-year-olds. Here they were, two grown women, perched on chairs meant for very small fannies. Miss Rudnicki’s fanny spilled out both sides of her seat. Florence’s skirt felt unnaturally hiked. She couldn’t cross her legs. She held her knees together primly and looked down at

the piece of construction paper Miss Rudnicki had just handed her.

“What is this, Miss Rudnicki?” Florence said.

“Your daughter calls it writing, Mrs. Murphy,” Miss Rudnicki said. “When I asked your daughter to read what she had written, she told me a remarkable story.”

“Bunny can be a remarkable little liar, sometimes,” Florence said.

Seeing alarm in the teacher’s expression, Florence amended it.

“Bunny likes to make up stories,” she said.

The teacher’s cheeks were still red beneath the rouge. Florence felt judged.

“I’m curious,” the teacher said. “I’ve never met a student quite like Margaret. I think she is a remarkable girl. I think she might be very quick, very bright. Do you read to her at home? She seems to have a knowledge—”

“Do I read to her? Do I *read* to her?”

The question irritated Florence. Who had time to read to a child who could barely talk? Who could find the time to find the books? Who had the will to sit down with a child who never looked at her mother with any sort of loving affection and who seemed at all times to be hiding something? Wasn’t she sending the girl to school for a reason? Wasn’t school the place for children to be read to?

“What is this meeting all about?” she said. “What is it you want from me, Miss Rudnicki?”

The teacher’s face resolved into a tentative and tepid smile.

“I’d like to enroll Margaret in my little lending library,” she said. “It’s only for my brightest students. The ones who show interest, that is. Once a week on Mondays I’ll be sending your daughter home with a book. She brings it back the following Monday. If you agree, then I’ll ask you to sign this paper saying you take responsibility for the cost of the book should it be lost or damaged.”

Miss Rudnicki spoke like a teacher. Florence felt like a child. But she signed the paper.

As she was walking home across the schoolyard, Florence began to think about Ruby Bickford and her daughter, Agnes. She couldn't help herself. She was about to pass by Ruby's old house, and even if the French-Canadian family had torn down that shed and planted a pear tree in its place, and even if they had painted the house a tasteful forest green, Ruby's tulips would still be coming up in the yard each spring, reminding Florence of the way it had been. She scurried a little, to get past that house more quickly, and when she was back inside her own house she sat in her favorite chair, took the letter from Ruby Bickford out of her pocketbook, and read it once more. Already the folds in the paper were softly pulling apart because Florence kept taking the letter out and opening it up and reading it and then folding the letter back up and putting it away again, as if it were a precious, shameful secret. She should have thrown the goddamn letter away without reading it in the first place. Every time she took it out it was because she meant to get rid of it once and for all. But then she would think, why not read it one more time, and when she was done, she would look down and see her hands putting the letter safely away, back in her pocketbook. This time she promised herself to throw it away for sure. But not yet. She began to read. When she got to the words *dearest love*—to think that Ruby had called her *dearest love*, had written it down—she smiled. *Love*. She let the word settle into her soul. There was no harm in it. No one would ever know. She put the letter close to her face and sniffed it. She tried to find some scent of Ruby's love in the paper but it only smelled like the inside of Florence's pocketbook. There was no impression of Ruby on its pages: not her scent, not her smile, and not her grief. By the time Ruby's letter had come in the mail, Florence had already convinced herself that her Bunny was a deceitful little killer. At the same time, she had convinced herself that her girl had never left the house on the day of the schoolyard flood. The contradiction between Florence's two convictions was so powerful that it rendered her helpless whenever she thought about writing back to Ruby, and she never did, but she kept Ruby's letter in her pocketbook, and never threw it away, and

took it out frequently, and always, always meant to answer one day.

One day.

When she found the words.

## Fourteen

ON A MONDAY, MARGARET BROUGHT HER FIRST BOOK HOME from Miss Rudnicki's little lending library. The book was called *The Tortoise and the Hare*. Margaret had no idea why her teacher insisted she take a book home. She enjoyed looking at the shape of the word *tortoise*. Otherwise she found the book puerile. She threw it aside. Her lack of interest made her mother feel vindicated. When Margaret brought *The Tortoise and the Hare* back to school, Miss Rudnicki asked her if her mother had read the story to her. Margaret shook her head. Margaret hadn't asked her mother to read to her. She had no interest in either the tortoise or the hare. It had begun to trouble Margaret that she was going to school and Agnes was not. The feeling made her less curious about what the teacher wanted from her. Every week on a Monday her teacher would hand her a book and she didn't know why. Most of the books were about boys and their dogs. Big Red. Lassie. Rin Tin Tin. Old Yeller. After a while Margaret would mostly hide these books in a low cubby in the cloakroom and give them back to her teacher the following Monday in exchange for the next one.

After school, Margaret kept traveling through the untended woods and across the potato field to see Maarten De Smedt and his birds. She learned the names of the wing feathers and recited them endlessly: *primaries, primary coverts, allulae, secondaries, secondary coverts, marginals, scapulae*. Whenever Margaret asked him about the message she had sent to heaven, Maarten De Smedt would tell her not to worry.

"The answer will come any day now," he said.

Margaret learned how to tell a champion pigeon from a weak pigeon, by the color of its eyes. She learned how to

check for eggs. She learned how to bear the pain when a broody bird lashed out. When the babies hatched they were hideous featherless naked things with enormous eyes and black skin. Maarten De Smedt taught Margaret how to band the young ones with a metal band. It was necessary to hurt the babies, just a little, by pulling the fourth toe cruelly back toward the leg so the band would slip over the foot.

She learned to mix the feed: corn, pea, milo, hemp.

She learned how to whistle like Maarten De Smedt.

Then the snows came, the way snows do, and the path through the wood to see Maarten De Smedt was impassable for such a small girl, but every afternoon on her way home from school Margaret would see his pigeons circling. She knew them well enough to pick them out of the crowded flock by name. They tipped their primary feathers in her direction.

After a long time and many days of bitter cold, a first day came when the sun was out and the ground was like a soft wet sponge. Spots of bare ground were beginning to connect with each other, and what was left of the snow looked like tiny fast-melting glaciers in a muddy sea of yellow grass.

Florence and Dolly's yard was overrun by moles.

"If it's not one thing then it's another," Dolly said.

Florence hated the moles. They were brazen eyeless rodents who would show their hideous faces to her whenever she was out on the lawn pushing the mower. There were little mounds of dirt everywhere. She needed to mow around them. Every morning there would be seventeen new mounds of dirt in the yard. The moles chewed through the roots of her sister's mock orange bush. Dolly's magnificent ornamental—it had survived many a harsh winter only because from October to April Dolly trudged out there every night when a frost was forecast, to cover it—began to wither and die all along one side.

"Where were the moles all winter?" Florence said.

"Grubb's sells traps," Dolly said. "If you want, I'll pick some up."

“No bother,” Florence said. “It’s close for me. I’ll go after work. How many traps? Five?”

“Ask at the store. They’ll know,” Dolly said.

Margaret didn’t mind the moles. If she threw her body flat on the ground and listened, then she could hear them under there, building cities, having babies, being moles.

\* \* \*

Now that the snow had nearly been defeated Margaret knew the time had come to travel through the untended woods to see Maarten De Smedt. The little man greeted her as if the winter had never divided them. He was busy letting his spring-hatched birds out of the loft for their afternoon exercise. They were such young birds that they had just discovered the use of their flight feathers and they did not yet know how to flock. The air was a wild tangle of chaotic near collisions.

“Do you have a message back from heaven for me?” Margaret said. “It’s been months and months. What’s going on?”

The little man looked dazed and simple, as if he could not remember his own name.

Then he said “Oh!” and Margaret felt better.

“Don’t worry, honey,” he said. “Sweet Rosina is still on her way. It’s a long, long way up there to heaven! And don’t forget, Sweet Rosina needs to come all the way back from heaven, too—”

There was a false note in Maarten De Smedt’s voice. Margaret heard it. She had just in that instant grown old enough to hear falseness in the voices of adults.

“Why is Sweet Rosina taking so long?” she said. “What’s the matter with that bird? I’ve waited and waited and now it’s time! It’s past time!”

“How old are you, sweet girl?” he said. “Mmm?”

Margaret didn’t see what her age had to do with it.

“You’re old enough to know it’s just a pretty story, aren’t you?”

His words terrified her, so she pushed them out of her head and blamed the bird—for the way that dumb bird was taking so long to come back from heaven with a message from Agnes Bickford.

“What do you mean, it’s just a pretty story?” she yelled. “I’ve waited and waited!”

The man raised his palms skyward, in a gesture of defeat.

Here, now, on a spring day when the air is filled with a hundred young birds clashing and colliding in midair, and when the ground beneath her is as soggy and sour as an old sponge, Margaret understands.

Agnes is dead.

She, Margaret, killed her.

Here is a man watching a girl who won’t stop screaming.

He thinks: What a mighty tantrum for such a little girl!—and he wants the girl to stop making all that noise. She’s frightening the birds. He’s at a loss. He’s not sure if he should say something, and if he does say something he isn’t sure whether it’s best to comfort, or to scold—and then she solves his problem by running back over the potato field, that’s good!—go home to your mother!—your mother will know what to do!—but now that she is gone, he is shaken. He is spent. He knows she won’t be coming back. He has betrayed her. He bends over, picks up a feather from the ground. The pain of losing this odd friendship is maddening and unexpected. He whistles to his birds.

\* \* \*

Margaret, alone and in the woods, stops screaming. She has just learned that some things are forever, and other things are never-again. When she comes to an unexpected clearing in the woods where the ground is covered in fallen branches and old beer bottles and discarded trash she flops down on her back among those broken things. She decides to stay there forever. Maybe Agnes is in the ground after all. Maybe Agnes is about



to reach up and drag Margaret down under there with her, right now, and nothing will be left behind on this spot but a black, bubbling pool—and that's how Margaret's story ends!

Agnes is dead.

Margaret tries to drown out the sound of that hollow hopeless word by listening to the other sounds around her. The sway and sigh of the trees. The scratch of dead leafless branches overhead. The dead leaves, scuttling.

Dead!

She rolls over, on her stomach, and puts her ear to the ground. She listens, and she prays—*let Agnes be an Angel, or a Holy Ghost, or let her live in the ground like a mole, at least*—

She opens her heart. She waits for an answer.

*You killed my Agnes*, a little voice says.

\* \* \*

The girl stood up, terrified. She wanted to run. But running would make the little voice catch her more quickly. It was always that way, in dreams. She walked as fast as she could, each step so stiff and dreary that she was certain something was going to grab her by the ankles and drag her down—or maybe it would rake deep furrows along her back with its claws—but before it happened, before the thing grabbed her, she had come out of the trees unscathed. She was standing in somebody's ordinary backyard. She was back in a place with right angles and chimneys and sidewalks. She was back in a part of the world where she could tell once more what was real and what was just a made-up story. She could see the French-Canadian girls at their hopscotch or some other game, over there, in the street. Those girls looked like a faraway happy dream. She could see her mother and aunt standing in her own little backyard, just three houses down. Her mother and her aunt looked like they were having a serious conversation. Her mother was holding something. Her mother would save her. Her aunt would save her. And Margaret did run, and tripped, fell down, stood up, kept going, until she was safe with her

mother and her aunt in her very own backyard, where her mother was holding up a dead mole at arm's length.

“I finally caught one, Margaret!” her mother said. “Look!”

“Margaret?” her aunt said. “What is it, honey? Are you all right?”

The soft fur.

Something that once paddled through dirt with strong flippers, now dead.

“It's dead!” Margaret shouted.

Somehow the deadness had followed her home. The deadness was here. The thing in her mother's hands loomed and gaped. The horrifying slackness. Her mother was speaking to her, but the words she spoke attached themselves to no meanings. Aunt Dolly was looking at her with her usual expression of perpetual sorrow. These women couldn't help her. Margaret knew that now. She ran inside the house and upstairs to her room, thinking she would be safe there, maybe—but the creature was already waiting there, in the way of all terrible dreams. Huddled in a corner. Clutching its raggedy blue robes to itself. Peering out at Margaret with one moist, accusing eye. *Wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you live, I will live; and your sorrows will be my sorrows, and I will never leave you,* it said. And then, with supernatural swiftness—before Margaret could run away, or cry for help, or take a breath, or do anything at all to save herself—the creature scuttled up on Margaret's back and stayed there, and from that day to this the girl could never rid herself of that dead-weight sorrow and was forced to carry that terrible burden on her back wherever she would go.

*Yes, Margaret, Poor Deer whispers in my ear. That's the way it really was.*

Her voice carries none of its typical sharp malice. Her words are calm and gentle. I'm so startled by her change in tone that I'm certain she's about to forgive me, and so I turn to face her, full of hope—but all I see is the face of a deer; the

expressionless mask of a deer; and a miniature reflection of myself, on the surface of her cold black eye.

## Fifteen

**SHE WAS SEVEN WHEN A SUMMER CAME ALONG SO BLISTERINGLY** hot that the blackflies couldn't bite because her skin was perpetually covered in protective sweat. It was too hot to cook. Sunday Dinners were no more. Now Margaret and her mother and Aunt Dolly ate TV dinners, straight from their tin-foil trays. Margaret discovered she possessed a strange new power over her mother. "I'm thinking of the little girl who used to live next door," she would say, and in an instant she was free to leave the table without eating the peas. She could do as she pleased. It was as if she were already dead. She could slip out of the house anytime she wanted and know that her mother would never again come running after her, calling her name on the wind like a booming heraldic trumpet.

The boys had begun to play a new game in the untended woods that summer, chasing the girls, and whenever they caught one they would yank on the bottom of her blouse in a way that made all the buttons pop off, pop-pop-pop, after which the girl had no choice but to run home crying and clutching her blouse together in front. The boys could never catch Margaret. She might as well have been an honorary boy. She had muscles and calluses from climbing trees and she had a certain swagger that came from her nine-fingered reputation. Also the boys could tell there was something riding on Margaret's back. There was something so hunched and sorrowful about that girl. It made them keep their distance.

Sometimes Margaret would tell herself there was no Poor Deer riding on her back or crouched in a corner of her bedroom at night. Then again, she could feel the weight she carried. She could see Poor Deer's blank eyes staring out at her in the dark. On very bad nights Poor Deer liked to say to

Margaret: *I'm very tired, turn down the silken covers on your little bed*, and then the musky brute would crawl into bed next to Margaret, and throw her cold swampy legs around the girl, pinning her down and pouring bad dreams into her ear.

Whenever the smallest good thing came along in Margaret's life—whenever she realized she was happy—say, maybe another girl smiled at her at the playground, or a pretty stone on the ground caught Margaret's eye—there Poor Deer would be, weeping and screeching: *You don't deserve happy things you stupid girl when you took them all away from your friend.*

Everywhere Margaret traveled through those soft green days of summer she skipped a small skip and touched her chin and prayed. She could never neglect these rituals or get them wrong. Where to step. What to pray. She needed to do all things perfectly. If she did any of them wrong then clouds would gather into thunderheads by afternoon, and by evening a storm would come, and Margaret would be forced to cut small cuts in her arms with her mother's nail scissors. The cuts looked like tiny, gaping mouths. She wasn't allowed to flinch during this ritual and she never did. When she was done, she put rubbing alcohol on the tiny wounds and gritted her teeth and held her breath until the purifying pain passed, and in this way, she made the storms pass. She covered her wounds with elastic bandages.

“Stop wasting those bandages!” her mother said. “One day you'll cut yourself for real and there won't be a bandage in the house!”

\* \* \*

On a day when the idea of going back to school was seeping into the world, in the form of four-color back-to-school advertisements in the Sunday papers, Margaret found herself creeping through the untended woods like a predatory cat. Her mother was working at the lunch counter. Her aunt Dolly was sleeping. Even though summer wasn't over the leaves were beginning to turn and snap underfoot. She could see Maarten De Smedt's pigeons flapping above and considered whether she should go see him and then thought better of it because she

was deeply ashamed of her former gullibility and didn't want to face him.

"You're that nine-fingered girl," somebody said.

She turned around and recognized him at once.

"You're that flat-headed boy," she said.

"Did you kill that girl?" Tommy Junior said.

Margaret was caught off guard by this strange rude question. She shook her head but her face was burning. The air was still. The trees had quit their skittering. The birds fell silent. She began to walk away. Tommy Junior followed. She climbed a tree. He tried to follow her up there, but she was a better climber, and his legs were unnaturally short for his body, and he was wearing the wrong kind of shoes.

"I can't climb like you," he said, from the ground.

"Go home if you want," she said.

"I have something to show you," he said. "Come on. It's really good."

It felt unlikely that this boy would have anything good to show her, but she jumped down and followed him, because she was lonely.

"We're here," he said.

There was an old rusty shovel on the ground and not much else until Tommy Junior moved some branches. Margaret saw a hole in the ground. There was a sheet of plywood half covering the hole to make a roof over it.

"This is my secret hideout," he said. "I made it."

He climbed in.

"Come on," he said, from within.

Margaret could tell that Tommy Junior was one of those boys whom everyone shunned. In this way the two of them were alike, and that's why she climbed in there. Together they sat cross-legged in the hole that he had dug. It was a rudimentary and unsatisfactory hole. It was as small as a small

coffin. It was so small that their knees touched. They needed to hunch to keep their heads from bumping on the plywood ceiling. The boy had dug little ledges into the dirt walls of his secret hideout to keep his treasures on, and he was very proud of these ledges and what they held. A roll of nickels. A rusty spade. Stubs of candles and a box of matches, wrapped in wax paper. He showed her all of these things reverently, handing them to her one by one.

“I killed my dog,” Tommy Junior said. “I fed him chocolate. I wanted him to like me and now he’s dead.”

He said it breathlessly.

“I’d better get home,” Margaret said. She didn’t want to hear about his dog in any detail.

“Okay,” he said.

When they climbed out of the hole, a warm afterglow was all that was left of the day. Margaret walked along, with Tommy Junior trailing. Now and then he needed to break into a small trot to catch up. Something crackled in the woods. They both heard it. Margaret began to walk more quickly because she didn’t want to find out what had crackled. Then again, she didn’t want to walk so quickly that she would leave the boy behind. She had never met another killer before. They were alike, that way. She wondered if they could be friends. She wondered if he could see Poor Deer riding on her back. Maybe he had a Poor Deer of his own. They began to lope along together, neither fast nor slow, as if they were wild things that belonged to the same pack. When they came to the place where the trees thinned and the houses appeared they wordlessly walked their separate ways toward their homes, in such complete agreement with each other that they had no need to say good-bye. It was so lovely that evening. It was the end of summer. The air was curiously golden in the late afternoon sun. She would have liked to have been his friend for all time, but he was a year older, and he went to Catholic school. After that golden day loping together through the woods Margaret only saw the boy from a distance, when he was serving as an altar boy. Once at Mass their eyes met accidentally. He looked away quickly. Margaret felt herself

shivering. She could tell the boy had made up his mind it wasn't the chocolate that had killed that old dog to begin with.

\* \* \*

When spring came around again her mother sewed her a white dress and petticoat. Her aunt gifted her an illustrated book called *The Lives of the Saints*. Margaret fell in love with the picture of Saint Agnes, the girl who had willingly grown fur all over her body to hide her nakedness from the heathens. Margaret liked to imagine Agnes running away on all fours into the untended woods while the heathens stood dumbfounded. It was exactly what a girl named Agnes would have done in that situation. Her mother bought her a pair of white patent-leather shoes, and a veil, and socks with a ribbon of lace sewn on the tops. Her aunt bought her a crucifix from the church store. The crucifix was as long as Margaret's arm. The nails through Christ's hands and feet were real.

"You can hang it in your bedroom," her aunt said. "I'll help you."

It was the springtime of Margaret's first Holy Communion and so maybe there was hope for her. Three afternoons a week Margaret sat in a room in the church basement with twelve other second graders to learn about the Sacraments. A nun listened to the children practice their confessions. The nun's name was Sister Bonny Face. One by one the children took their turn standing up and saying their practice confessions out loud to this kindly nun. When it was Margaret's turn to say her practice-confession she stood up. Her chair scraped. A terrible clarity coursed through her and she knew if she didn't tell the truth then God would punish her but she couldn't say the words. Her teeth had come loose and they were rattling in her head like seeds in a hollow gourd. Then the words tied themselves into a knot, and the knot didn't fit through her lips. She could do no more than stand and shake.

"You little ninny," Sister Bonny Face said.

The kindly nun took the girl's hand in hers. She was preparing to give it some well-deserved raps across the palm, with the ruler she always carried in her sleeve for that purpose,



but she was taken aback by the startling shape of the little hand in hers, and she looked at the child for answers, and she felt herself taken over by a sadness that she didn't understand. She let go of the ruler. The ruler dropped to the floor with a clatter. And she could not have told you why, but she raised the girl's hand to her lips and kissed it.

"Take your seat," she said.

\* \* \*

Margaret and her mother were summoned to the rectory for a special meeting with the new priest. This new priest had come to the parish because the old priest had died. The new priest was so enormous that from a distance he looked like a planet, or a moon at least, especially in those times in the liturgical year when his vestments were scarlet or purple. Everyone said so. His name was Father O'Flaherty but everyone called him Father O'Fatty.

"Father, I don't know why my Bunny was so disrespectful in her Catechism class," Florence said.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Bunny?" the new priest said.

"She doesn't talk much," Florence said. "Sometimes I can't get a word out of her. She's behind in all her subjects. Her teachers can't tell if she's slow or just obstinate."

"Poor little lamb," the new priest said.

"Poor little simpleton," Florence agreed.

This new priest wanted to help. Maybe the girl was too shy to practice confessing her sins in front of the entire Catechism class. Maybe her sins were of such an intimate girlish nature that they couldn't easily be shared outside the confessional booth. Boys of that age were so rowdy and crude. He offered to hear the girl's confession privately. The girl started up in her seat at his suggestion and then she nodded uncertainly. He donned his liturgical stole, and the girl and her mother followed him from his tiny rectory office out into the vast and soaring church.

They had come to the narrow confessional booth.

He opened the little door for the girl.

She hesitated.

“There is nothing to fear,” he said. “God is here. Here is where you can speak frankly with Him.”

“The floor is dirty in there,” the girl said.

What a sad little girl, the new priest thought. Something about the girl filled him with a hollow grief. A helplessness.

The girl walked into the little booth. She stood there looking up at him.

Did he need to instruct her how to kneel, what to do?

“Kneel down!” her mother said.

The girl knelt.

\* \* \*

Here she was back in this box again. The last time she'd been in here God Himself had come to her, in the shape of a Giant Hand. Now she had a Poor Deer on her back. She heard the new priest open the little door next to hers. He climbed inside the place where priests belonged. He sat down heavily. She could see him through the greasy screen that divided them. He began to speak to her through the screen—*Don't worry, Bunny, God is here*—but she wasn't fooled. It wasn't God in there. It was the new priest. Her emotions were extreme because she knew this priest was expecting her confession. There was no way out. If she tried to run, her mother would be just outside the door to haul her back in again. She tried to confess. She tried to say the words—*kill, murder, blue in the face*—but none of the words would fit through her lips. Her throat closed up. She began to pray in her own way, to save herself, reciting all the magic words she had discovered in the dictionary and in her aunt's fairy tale compendium, plus all the other words that she had gathered up in her heart, over the years, for times like these—*innocence—insouciance—capacious—nourish—balderdash, china plates, bearskin*—

The priest heard the girl's gibberish. Was she slow? Was she wicked? He was new to the parish. He was trying to bring

faith in God to a town that smelled like sulfur. The sins of these people were mundane. They confessed their sins in a self-congratulatory way that rankled him—*I took my uncle's truck for a joy ride and it got stuck in the mud and he paid forty dollars to get it pulled out again and ha, ha, he still don't know who did it*—the parishioners didn't respect him—they called him *Father O'Fatty*—

“I stole,” the girl said.

The girl had found a word she could say out loud and it felt like the truth to her.

She had stolen a life.

She had stolen the breath of her friend.

A weight lifted, and she felt hope.

“What did you steal?” the priest said.

Did she need to answer that question? Was she forgiven?

“If you give back what you stole, then God will forgive you,” the priest said.

*God will never forgive you,* Poor Deer said.

“God will forgive me,” Margaret said. “God is stronger than you.”

*God isn't stronger than me,* Poor Deer said. *No one is stronger than me.*

A big sweaty sigh came sighing through the greasy screen.

“God will forgive you if you're sorry you've hurt Him,” said the sandpaper voice of the priest. “Until you're ready to confess, your sin remains. Come back when you're ready to speak to God from your heart.”

After they got home, her mother told Aunt Dolly all about the debacle at the church. She spoke bitterly.

Aunt Dolly listened.

“Poor child,” she said. “It doesn't matter.”

\* \* \*

Maybe they all secretly decided Margaret had done her best at confessing her sins, and that it was good enough. It was a mystery to the girl. No one ever explained why, when Easter came, her mother dressed her in the white dress and veil and white shoes after all. Margaret walked up to the altar with prayerful hands along with the other children. But when it was her turn to eat the wafer she closed her lips in a thin grim line because she knew there was no greater sin than to take the wafer into her mouth when her soul was still a black rotten pear. The new priest tried to push the wafer between her lips—as if such a gross crude tactic would persuade her—and then, defeated, he moved on to the next child, who swallowed the wafer down dutifully, even though by then it had been mashed up by Margaret’s grim lips.

Margaret was forced to sit with the other girls after Mass and to eat a pancake breakfast on the church lawn. There she sat like Judas at the Last Supper. The boys sat at their own table. They were wearing white starched shirts and pressed wool trousers and clip-on bow ties. The pancakes were raw in the middle. Lumps of old snow were clumped all around and the wind came from the north but none of the girls was permitted to wear a coat because the mothers wanted to take Polaroids of all the girls sitting together in their pretty white dresses. The orange juice was sour. Margaret’s stain of sin remained.

On the way home Margaret’s aunt and mother sat rigidly in their bus seat and Margaret sat across from them and bit on her arm and looked out. The two women were filled with disappointment and grief. They could tell the Jesus crumbs had fled Margaret’s lips and that the girl’s soul was still as black and rotted as ever. The bus stopped at the stoplight in front of the mill entrance and Margaret wasn’t surprised to see two skinny dogs fighting over something that had once been alive but was now meat. The light turned green. The bus driver stepped on the gas so hard that the three of them were thrown back in their seats.

“Goddamnit,” her mother said. “Now I’ve got a crick in my neck!”

“Settle down, Florence,” her aunt said.

“You settle down,” her mother said.

Once they were home Margaret’s mother ran straight into her bedroom and wouldn’t come out. Aunt Dolly wept into her handkerchief and blew her nose. Margaret went upstairs to her room and sat on her bed admiring her shoes. They were the first white patent leather shoes she had ever owned. The shoes were shiny and barely scuffed.

Her mother came out of her bedroom and into Margaret’s room. She was carrying a big shallow box.

“Time to get those fine things off of you before you ruin them,” she said.

Her mother helped her take off the white veil and white dress and the fresh new petticoat and then her mother took the shoes. Her mother folded the cloth things first and put them carefully inside the box, and then she put the shoes into a drawstring bag and set them in the box with the rest. Her mother added a lavender sachet or two before closing the lid and she tied the box up with a broad white sateen ribbon. She patted the closed box tenderly. It dawned on Margaret that she would never wear those white shoes again.

Once her mother left with her big box, Margaret felt better, however much she grieved the missing shoes. She looked out her window and pondered the strange small clumps of old snow all over the land. The snow had contorted into ugly shapes after so many days of melting in the spring weather only to freeze again overnight. Something small and perfectly white under her aunt’s mock orange bush caught Margaret’s attention. It glimmered at her like a little blinking eye. She dressed in her play clothes and ran outside to investigate. When she looked under her aunt’s mock orange bush, she saw the birdskull that she had put there herself, long ago. The rest of the birdbones had dissolved or been buried or carried off by predators but the small skull remained.

Margaret sat on the ground next to the bush. Soon she heard a low warble coming from the birdskull. The ground was damp from melting snow and the damp had begun to seep

through. She closed her eyes and waited for the next thing to happen, and before long some kind of animal put its cold wet nose inside of her curled hand and snuffed it. Margaret thought it must be Poor Deer trying to get her attention, but when she opened her eyes, it wasn't Poor Deer. It was the neighbors' dog, Bruno, who was doing the snuffing. Margaret pulled her hand away. The dog looked at her reproachfully and flopped down next to her on the damp ground and began to lick its genitals. After the dog was done with its bath it rested its head on her lap and fell asleep. Margaret liked the feeling of a big warm head on her leg.

She thought about the friend she had killed.

She tried to reach out to Agnes with her mind, as she would in prayer.

*Agnes Bickford, under my roof, she prayed.*

A feeling of calm came over her. She felt certain, in those few precious moments, that Agnes was in heaven after all, and that she was looking down at Margaret and smiling. It seemed very likely, for those few moments at least, that Agnes had forgiven her. That's when the dog Bruno woke up and began to lick Margaret's face frenziedly, as if to say: *Yes, yes, Agnes loves you.* When the dog was done licking Margaret's face he trotted happily toward home, and something about the way the dog held its tail high in the air as it pranced along home made Margaret wonder whether this dog, too, had received a message from heaven, the message being that he was a most beloved dog, whose family loved him, and that he should stop his naughty ways and go home and be a good dog from then on. Margaret thought over her entire day, from early that morning when her mother dressed her in a pure white dress and a small veil to these moments, here, now, when she found herself passing through a time of unfamiliar peacefulness.

When Margaret went inside she found her aunt sitting alone in the kitchen, in the half dark, with folded hands.

"Aunt Dolly?" she said.

Dolly looked up.

She saw her damp strange niece all covered over in mud and dog hair, and loved her.

“Why did you behave that way at Mass?” she said. “I swear, Margaret, one day you’ll be the death of your mother and me.”

She said it gently. She did not blame. She wanted to understand. It was just an expression, *you’ll be the death of me*. But Margaret didn’t want to be the death of anyone ever again. She was so overcome with contrition that she rushed to her aunt’s side and knelt there, resting her head on her aunt’s lap and throwing her arms around her aunt’s broad middle. She began to cry. She was shaking with grief. Her aunt couldn’t think of a single word to say. She was stunned into silence. She patted the girl’s hair, softly, with gnarled hands.

## Sixteen

**BY THIS TIME IN MY STORY MISS RUDNICKI HAS GONE AWAY** to live in a retirement community in sunny Arizona where her arthritis never twinges. She kept sending Margaret Christmas cards each year, though, usually with reindeers on them. Margaret didn't write back. She'd given up writing by then in any script other than her secret ciphers, which Miss Rudnicki wouldn't have been able to read. Margaret missed Miss Rudnicki, though, and she missed Miss Rudnicki's little lending library even more, because even if Miss Rudnicki's books had been insipid, there was no other library in town. Margaret had kept back one of the books Miss Rudnicki had lent to her. *Old Yeller*. It was the only book she had ever come across in which the dog dies in the end. It made her believe that any kind of ending was possible when it came to stories, made up or real.

The only other books Margaret could find in that cramped town were Sunday Missals and Reader's Digest Condensed Books. She made herself content by reading her aunt's fairy tale compendium over and over again until the pages were so soft from her page-turning that they felt like calfskin.

She was an inch, perhaps two, under five feet tall in a year when winter came so harsh and early that she was forced by her mother to wear a coat over her Halloween fairy-princess costume. She didn't mind as much as she might have, though, because the coat was the color of a big orange pumpkin. That's why the coat had been such a bargain. Margaret resolved to make the best of it. Unlike the other children, who just looked like normal children with their winter coats on, Margaret could pretend that she'd meant to be a pumpkin all along. It snowed that Halloween night. Margaret broke a tooth on a frozen



Tootsie Roll. The next day the weather was warm again. Green shoots poked out from the trees, only to turn black when the town was plunged once more into a terrible dark winter.

By day the sky was so bright it was white, and at night it was empty of stars.

And then it was warm again.

On a warm day in January—the kind of day old people in town called “Indian Summer”—Margaret sat at the lunch counter waiting for her mother to be done working for the day. Someone had left the book *Lord Jim* behind on a revolving stool and Margaret was reading it. She was drawn to the story of the boy who abandoned ship and left a shipful of passengers behind to die terrible watery deaths. She understood Jim’s inner turmoil. She wondered whether an island of guano would figure in her future, as it had briefly figured for Jim in this novel, and whether being cast away to live on such an island would offer her the chance to atone that so far had eluded her. She was waiting for her mother to finish working so the two of them could go to the five-and-dime together, to pick out Aunt Dolly’s birthday present, but her mother had just changed her mind about their plan because a man had taken an interest.

“Margaret, Margaret!” her mother said.

Margaret looked up from *Lord Jim*.

“You’re old enough to take the bus home by yourself,” her mother said. “Here is the fare. There is a bus in three minutes. When you get home be sure not to wake your aunt.”

“What about Aunt Dolly’s birthday present?”

“We still have nine days before Aunt Dolly’s birthday! Go home. See what good you can do. There is laundry to fold.”

Margaret went. She took *Lord Jim* with her. Outside, it was another one of those bizarre balmy days, so warm that the snow was turning to icy slush. Some boys threw snowballs at her and chased her all the way to the river. She was a good runner, though, and in the end they got discouraged or bored and stopped chasing her. Only, she felt confused by the wind

and by the whiteness of the sky. She looked around, to orient herself. She was standing in a place where the snow had piled itself up so strangely. Then she spotted the bus, far up on the high bank, traveling along the river road without her. As her eyes followed the bus, she found herself looking at a bridge where no bridge should be, unless she was standing in the middle of the river, and the hard-packed snow she was standing on was covering river ice, not solid ground.

Margaret doesn't remember hearing the ice crack beneath her feet but she remembers the plunge. She remembers the sharp sadness of knowing her book would be ruined. She remembers her hair, furling and unfurling in the water as she was swept downstream, and then—just as she had been taught to expect at the hour of her death—she saw all the years of her life pass by in an unpleasant, nauseating rush, until she was a very old woman, sitting in a bed, propped up with many pillows, and surrounded by elaborate arrangements of magnificent flowers.

“You again!” the old woman said. “Listen to me, kid! You have got to steal that fancy car! It's the only way! Drive along the river road! Keep going until you get to Little Ida's Motor Lodge, eleven miles east of Niagara Falls—and, whatever you do, don't stop at the Mid-Town Bar—Poor Deer will show you the way—”

“Lady, what are you talking about?” Margaret said. She was already well on her way to drowning to death, or freezing to death. Her brain had slowed to a primitive slowness. She couldn't understand the half of what that grizzled old woman was saying to her.

“Bullfrog, Snicker-snack, Hummel Figurines,” the old woman said—and then she gave out a long death rattle and died.

At once Margaret found herself back in the river with her ugly heavy waterlogged orange coat dragging her down to a watery frozen death. She was bumping into rocks. She had traveled so far and so fast under the ice that the boys who had been throwing snowballs at her were now trying to rescue her from the wrong place entirely, far upstream. At this very

moment those boys were stretching themselves out in a human chain, wrist to ankle to wrist to ankle, imagining themselves to be the heroes of this story as they made their intrepid way over that treacherous, uncertain ice, inching along on their stomachs toward the hole where the nine-fingered girl had fallen in, and they were hoping—it was not much of a hope—that any second now they would see a little wet mittened hand poking up from the hole, and that this little wet mittened hand would grab the long stick that they were sticking out there in a mighty effort to make a miracle happen. They didn't know Margaret was already far downstream. She was alone under the ice. There was no one to rescue her. Even Poor Deer had abandoned her or maybe had been ripped right off her back by that fierce cold current. Margaret was on the verge of giving up and filling her lungs with a breath of sweet water when the river spat her out. She had come up near the mill, at a place where the mill's effluvial wastes had heated the river to an unnatural temperature and the ice was so thin and broken and yellow that it looked like pieces of ancient peanut brittle, floating atop the water. A few seconds later she bumped up on the riverbank where she joined a growing pile of sticks and garbage, collecting there. She felt a small moist nudge at her neck. She thought it must be Poor Deer, come to mock her. Or maybe it was Bruno the dog. She opened her eyes. It was Mr. Blunt. He was looking her over for signs of life.

“You again,” Margaret said.

Mr. Blunt gave a sharp grunt of thanksgiving—it seemed a miracle to him that this blue still child wasn't dead—and he gathered the girl up from the sticks and garbage and began to run back up the riverbank with Margaret in his arms. For years this man had suffered his own fashion of a Poor Deer, a voice in his head that would never stop screeching: *Why didn't you walk those girls home! If you had walked those girls home then they would both be alive today!*—unless he was drunk. Ever since the day of the schoolyard flood he had spent his days sitting in the Mid-Town Bar drinking beers and stumbling home to a wife and sons who despised him, the way he deserved to be despised. But deliverance had come to him, in the shape of this grubby frozen child. Seconds ago he had been

driving along the river road, weaving back and forth in a stupor of grief and booze, damned to a life of regret and guilt—but then!—he'd spied that ugly orange coat through the trees. He had grown instantly sober. Even in its sodden, mud-covered state he knew who that grotesque orange coat belonged to. Everyone in town had seen the nine-fingered girl wearing that orange coat and they had wondered what kind of mother would make her child wear such a thing. Now the coat had saved her; the coat had cried out to him: *Here is your chance to save yourself, by saving this girl, even if you couldn't save her little friend!* and he braked his car crazily and threw open the door and came running down the riverbank, spraining both ankles in his rush, and didn't feel the pain, because the only feeling he had room for was his need to save this girl. He flung off his great gray parka and grabbed the girl up from the cold sticks and wrapped her in it, and he was sobbing freely as he ran back up the riverbank in bounding leaps, with Margaret in his arms, and even though as it turns out he had fractured both of his ankles instead of spraining them, he ran like a man unburdened, because God had just given him the chance to make up for the day of the schoolyard flood. Step by step he was freeing himself from the guilty burden of his old sin.

As for Margaret, feeling the hope pulse out from this man, she began to wonder whether she, too, had been absolved by her soul-cleansing journey under the ice—because Poor Deer was no longer clinging to her back! Maybe that hideous vindictive droopy thing had been ripped free in the torrent and drowned. Maybe Margaret could live the rest of her life without the horror and the guilt and the terrible dreams. By the time Mr. Blunt finished bundling her into his car, Margaret felt certain she'd been washed free of her sin. She had been delivered up upon the sticks and garbage so that this man and no other could save her. She would never again need to think about Agnes Bickford, except with a nearly pleasant feeling of sad nostalgia, for a friend she had lost.

It was true.

After Margaret drowned and came back from the dead, she no longer saw the patterns in things.

She felt happy. And simple.

The dog Bruno treated her like a stranger. Birds no longer tipped their silver wings in her direction. She had passed through ice and flood and had been purged so completely that she no longer told herself stories, or played with her clothespin family. She was a normal, everyday, nine-fingered girl. She forgot all about Poor Deer, that bitter creature who had been her constant companion, and who had climbed on her back, and who had harassed and harangued her, and had nipped at her hair with yellow nubs of teeth. Now the only feeling left in Margaret about the day of the schoolyard flood was a vague memory of a weight she had once carried on her back, now lifted.

The French-Canadian girls next door sensed Margaret's cleansed heart and they began to invite her into their games of mumbly-peg and kick-the-can. They taught her to say the Lord's Prayer in French. Margaret thought the sound of French words was beautiful. Whenever Margaret began to have troubling thoughts of any kind she only needed to say *notre père! notre père! notre père! notre père!* under her breath many times, and she would be free of any old bad feeling.

"Seems like the river took what little sense she was born with," her mother said up through the floorboards from the kitchen one morning.

"Not much sense there to begin with," her aunt said.

Margaret will live in this state of happy ignorance for many years, until another crossroads of a day will come along for her, and she will find herself driving along the river road, in the rain, in a stolen car, and with yet another dead person on her conscience.

Poor Deer will have caught up with her by then.

Margaret will spy a young mother and her little girl standing by the side of the road. The mother will be in need of rescue. Her little girl will be as quick and small and bright as a shiny fish swimming upstream in swift water.

Until that day-to-come, Margaret's life will be mostly unremarkable.

# Purgatories

## Seventeen

SOMETIMES AS I WRITE THIS CONFESSION MY HAND CRAMPS up painfully. It's because I don't hold the pen correctly, on account of the missing finger. Even as I write these words—and these—my hand is cramping up so painfully that I want to quit. But I'm ignoring the feeling because I need to write this part of the story down fast, before I forget the way it really happened.

This is the story I'd planned to leave to the last. I was saving it to be my very own happy ending. But Poor Deer has just informed me that she has another ending planned for me, an ending so spectacular that it will make this little story feel incidental, and you might say, almost trivial, even if I once might have thought it meant everything to me.

My story begins this way: *After Glo went to sleep that night Penny came over to the rickety desk where I sat and took hold of my hand and kissed it—*

\* \* \*

After Glo went to sleep that night Penny came over to the rickety desk where I sat and took hold of my hand and kissed it. Maybe she was being playful. Maybe she was teasing me. Maybe the gesture meant something very big that she couldn't explain in words. She didn't kiss me on the lips. Not on the cheek, either. Not even on the back of my hand like a chivalrous knight might have done. She kissed me smack on my finger stub, on the very same finger I'd halfway lost as a child. She kissed that stub-finger with many fast small kisses, gentle and good, the way a mother kisses away a child's hurt; and I thought about how my aunt Dolly had kissed me many times on that same missing finger, on the day when I first



came home from the hospital, and then I thought about how a kindly nun had once raised this hand to her lips and kissed it tenderly, in my hour of need; and I thought about all three of those women at once, and how different they were from one another, and yet, not so different.

Penny let go of my hand.

“What happened to you?” she said.

“I burned it,” I said.

“Do you want to see something?” she said.

She pulled her shirt off, so fast that I didn't have time to answer her question. And I did see something, although still not sure it's what she meant for me to see. What I saw was a big bruise running across her collarbone and under one arm. There were some smaller bruises around the base of her neck, too, like a necklace made of bruises. Those bruises must have been a few days old by then. Their colors were slowly pulling apart from one another, black and pink and yellow.

“What happened to *you*?” I said.

Penny tilted her head and didn't answer. She just looked at me, as if she were waiting for me to make a move. But I didn't know what kind of move she wanted from me. I didn't know what to do. What I did, though, was reach up to kiss the bruise running across her collarbone. I had that impulse. I wanted to kiss Penny the same way she had kissed me, with many small gentle kisses, like a mother taking the hurt away. And I thought: This is love. Oh, I know it wasn't like man-woman love. I know the difference. It wasn't big. It wasn't forced. It had no hurt in it. It was small and gentle and good. It asked nothing. It only gave. And then it was over. Penny stepped back. She pulled her shirt down over her head where it belonged. She called me an *odd duck*. She looked embarrassed, or unhappy. I knew I had done the wrong thing. A door, once opened, was now closed to me. But I also knew this: For a few seconds something true had happened between us, and I felt as if I'd just discovered a fresh new country, full of bright possibilities; and when I went to sleep that night I lay

on my back with my eyes wide open and imagined there were stars on the ceiling.

*What does a stupid wicked girl like you know about love?*

Maybe you're right, Poor Deer.

Maybe I'm a stupid wicked girl who doesn't know about love.

Or maybe I'm something else.

## Eighteen

EVER SINCE RUBY BICKFORD WENT WEST TO LIVE WITH HER brother Everett, Florence Murphy had been trying to catch the eye of a man at the lunch counter, any man, but preferably one who wasn't married. One day her prayers were answered. Margaret was twelve when she came home from school and saw an unfamiliar fancy car in the driveway. When Margaret came inside, the air was heavy with the scent of boiled meat and cigars, and there was a man sitting at the kitchen table. Her mother had pulled out the pressure cooker from its place in the back of the cupboard. Her mother was making beef tongue with mashed potatoes plus a side of glazed carrots for this man. It had once been Florence's signature dish, before the TV dinner years.

The man sitting at the table looked familiar. Margaret couldn't place him until she realized his face was identical to the face painted on the big sign downtown above the door at Grubb's Hardware Store. It was Mr. Grubb himself sitting at their table. It was a known fact in town that Mr. Grubb lived in the big city of Bangor, three hours south, and that he traveled north once a month to count his inventory. Lately whenever he was in town he'd wander down the street from his store to grab a free slice of pie from Florence Murphy. Margaret stood in the doorway, not wanting to come into the kitchen all the way, and not sure where to look. Mr. Grubb poured himself a drink and then held the bottle up in Margaret's direction. It wasn't a coarse gesture, but Margaret thought a man as old as Mr. Grubb should have known she was too young to drink liquor.

"Your mother won't join me. What about you?" he said.

"Of course not, Herb, she's just a girl," her mother said.

“She’s a big girl,” he said.

“This is my daughter, Herb,” her mother said. “Margaret, say hello to Mr. Grubb.”

Mr. Grubb waved at Margaret nonchalantly, as if he expected Margaret to know he was the famous Hardware King.

“Make yourself useful, Margaret,” her mother said. “Come peel potatoes.”

Her mother had done her hair up in a French Twist, and the top button on her sailor-blouse was saucily unbuttoned. Poor Mother! She was trying so hard to be a minx but her skin was transparent and sallow. She looked careworn. Margaret felt a tender pity for her mother. She began to peel the potatoes. The work felt awkward because she was being watched.

“That’s a beautiful girl you got there, Florence,” Mr. Grubb said. “I can tell you’ve been a good mother to her.”

“She’s a handful,” her mother said. “I could tell you stories.”

Mr. Grubb smiled at Margaret in a friendly way. He kept looking at her even after the smile went away. Margaret wasn’t sure what he meant by it. She looked to her mother for guidance. Her mother looked back sharply. The man kept on with his banter. He thought he was being charming. Her mother opened some cabinets and closed them again because whatever she was looking for wasn’t in there. She seemed bewildered. Then she found a glass in the sink and rinsed it.

“I guess I will have that drink after all, Herb,” she said.

Her mother sat down next to him and he poured three fingers. She pulled her chair closer. The man lit her cigarette. Margaret kept peeling the potatoes, doing her part. A fly was making its way along the windowsill above the sink. It moved slowly, trapped inside its despair because it knew its end was near. Margaret thought about swatting it, and then felt pity and spared it. The pressure cooker had a glass lid and she could see the giant tongue in there, pulsing. She had never liked tongue. Chewing on it always made her mouth hurt sympathetically.

“Don’t slump, Margaret,” her mother said. “You’ll ruin your looks. You’re losing weight again.”

“She looks healthy enough to me, Florence,” Mr. Grubb said.

Nothing happened for a while. And then it must have felt too quiet in the room for Mr. Grubb to feel he was sufficiently the center of attention because he grabbed Margaret’s mother around her waist and squeezed her. Florence laughed along with him but she was not the kind of woman that a man could squeeze casually. Margaret understood her mother’s feeling, because she, too, had lately experienced men squeezing her in unexpected ways. Sometimes when she was walking along minding her own business a man would come driving by in a big car and would roll down the window. “I’m lost,” he would say. “Maybe you can help me.” He would plead with Margaret to come look at a map spread out on the steering wheel and across his lap. He would be playing with himself underneath. The map would rattle. That was the giveaway.

“Margaret!” her mother said.

“You’ve upset your mother,” Mr. Grubb said.

“Herb, you have no idea,” her mother said.

The Hardware King began to stroke her mother’s hair while looking dazedly into her eyes. Margaret held a half-peeled potato in her hand. Her sense of the world tilted crazily and she felt herself enter into a bizarre new territory where life was nothing more than a jumble of sense impressions and fleeting moments when people grabbed at each other for their sensual pleasure. She felt disgusted by those two. Her feelings were no match for her mother’s feelings. Soon Grubb was sitting at the kitchen table every time he came to town. He liked to pinch Margaret’s cheeks with his rough hands. Sometimes he would pinch her cheeks so hard that her mouth would squelch open and she would make an embarrassing wet sound, and Mr. Grubb would laugh, and her mother would tell her to mind her manners and to stop bothering the poor man.

Every morning, when Aunt Dolly came home from her shift at the mill, she would comment on the heavy smell of Mr.

Grubb's cigars pervading the house. Other than her dislike of his lingering cigar smell, though, Aunt Dolly didn't have much to say about Mr. Grubb, as their paths almost never crossed.

\* \* \*

Florence began traveling to the big city whenever she could, to visit Mr. Grubb on her days off from the lunch counter. She would stay overnight. She didn't take Margaret with her. Margaret was fine with that. She, like her aunt, disliked the smell of cigars. Soon her mother was gone so often that Aunt Dolly changed her shift at the mill from night shift to day shift, because she wanted to be there for Margaret in the evenings. After school was over for the day, Margaret took the bus to the mill, where she sat with the mechanics and waited until her aunt's shift was done. The foreman's name was Leroy Kelly. He would escort Margaret to a blue-painted bench along one wall where all the mechanics sat. The mechanics were those men at the mill who had nothing to do all day but wait and gently gossip until a machine ran out of paper, and then one of them would get up lazily from the blue bench and walk to the storeroom where the big rolls of paper were kept. The man would pull the next roll of paper from a stack with a big iron hook. Each roll was so heavy that when one landed it made the whole floor shake. The man would roll the paper across the floor like a giant wheel and mount it to the machine and start the machine up again.

Margaret liked to sit on the blue bench with the men and watch the ladies work. The napkins and paper coasters and the throwaway menus for the restaurant business came spitting out from the machines at a furious rate, a thousand or a million a minute. The sound of them being chopped and folded and spat was like the most earsplitting shuffle-of-cards you could imagine, and the women with their skilled, skilled hands would scoop up the paper things from the steel trays where they came spitting out, and would band them together with paper bands, and package them in cardboard boxes and send the boxes on their way. It was swift work.

Aunt Dolly had told Margaret the dispenser type of napkin was one-ply and that's why it took so little time for the

machine to cut and fold. The dispenser napkins came flying out at near-light-speed. Only the most skilled women could keep up with the dispenser napkin machine. Margaret loved watching her aunt's hands at work. Her hands were like the hands of a symphony conductor. Her aunt never once let the napkins get to the end of the tray and fall on the floor.

Florence telephoned one Sunday afternoon.

She didn't ask to speak with her daughter. She asked not to.

"It looks like it's going to be just you and me for the time being," Aunt Dolly said, after she hung up the phone.

## Nineteen

NOT LONG AFTER MARGARET'S MOTHER CALLED TO SAY SHE was never coming home again, the smell of Aunt Dolly's famous gravy filled the house for the first time in a good long time. When Margaret came into the kitchen her aunt was at the stove, stirring. Over the years Dolly had stopped cooking with any sort of skill or interest and yet here she was, stirring the drippings and sifting the flour in her slow, contemplative way.

"You were there when that girl died, weren't you?" Aunt Dolly said.

Aunt Dolly said it softly. She said it like the dearest, private prayer. She didn't look at Margaret. She didn't turn from the stove. She didn't confront Margaret with one of her famous honest stares. She just kept stirring the gravy, with her back turned to her niece. Her voice was gentle, not accusatory. She was inviting her niece to tell the truth for once. When Margaret nodded—such a small nod—her aunt didn't feel the need to turn around to witness the nod. It was as if her aunt didn't care either way. Her aunt would love her no matter what the answer was.

Aunt Dolly sighed the sigh of a woman who knows all about perpetual sorrows.

"It's a pity we don't know where to find that girl's mother," she said. "God knows it would ease her soul to hear the true story one day. But listen, honey. I will be honest with you. What happened to that girl was out of your hands."

Aunt Dolly turned the burner off. The way her shoulders settled made Margaret realize her aunt had said her say, and that they would never speak about the matter again.

"Do you want to carve the roast?" Aunt Dolly said.



“All right,” Margaret said.

Margaret began to slice the meat while Aunt Dolly poured her famous gravy deftly into her delicate porcelain gravy boat.

The roast was enormous, too much for just the two of them.

“It’s too bad we don’t have more people at our table to share in the feast,” Aunt Dolly said. “We’ll need to freeze some for another day. Maybe we’ll make roast sandwiches for the girls at the mill. Come on, Margaret, do your best! Let’s eat up!”

They used their best manners, out of respect for each other.

“Did you know I haven’t been on a single vacation since before you were born?” Dolly said out of the blue. “What do you think of that? I think we should go on a little vacation somewhere special. Atlantic City. Or maybe Niagara Falls. Just us two. What do you think?”

After they were done with their feast and had washed the dishes and put them all away, Dolly went straight to the tallboy china closet and opened the bottom drawer. It was mostly filled with knitting projects that the sisters had begun and abandoned over the years but underneath the skeins and needles were dozens of maps Margaret had never seen before. Dolly pulled the maps out. There was a state map of Alaska. A city map of Paris and one for Tokyo, too. There were maps of Vermont and New Hampshire and a special map just for upstate New York. Dolly unfolded them all, on the kitchen table and the counters and the floor. She put her finger on the dot marked “Niagara Falls.”

It looked so close.

“I’ve been planning this trip about thirteen years, I guess,” Dolly said.

Dolly adjusted her reading glasses and moved her finger along the route from their town to Niagara Falls. The route was laid out practically in a straight line from their house to the waterfall with only minor twists and dips along the way. Then Aunt Dolly called her friend Lois Leahy and asked if she

could borrow Lois's car for a few days, and Lois, who owed Dolly many favors, said: "Why, sure, Dolly! I would do anything for you!" and that was that. Dolly didn't even bother to call Margaret's school to tell them Margaret would be going on an impromptu vacation to Niagara Falls. She did take the time, though, to telephone her foreman at the mill.

"I don't know, Dolly, I'm in an awful bind," Leroy Kelly said.

"I'm not asking your permission, mister," Dolly said. "I'll be back when I'm back."

Dolly hung up.

The next morning they threw their toothbrushes and some clean underwear into pillowcases. When they started off the day felt so packed with sunshine and promise that Dolly and Margaret felt certain their lives were about to change forever. They were so sure of it that they began humming along to the radio songs.

"I didn't know you could drive, Aunt Dolly," Margaret said.

"Anyone can drive," Dolly said. "Remember that, Margaret. Any old fool can drive a car. You didn't need a license to drive a car in this state until 1937. That's right. You can look it up. All you do is press the floor pedals and move this knob and turn this wheel now and then. You're a smart cookie, Margaret. Come on. I'll teach you. You might need to know it one day."

Margaret thought it was bold of her Aunt Dolly to offer up Lois Leahy's car to a brand-new driver, especially one who was twelve years old, but when Margaret hesitated her aunt said "Courage!" and Margaret remembered the nurses at the hospital, who had also said "Courage!" to Margaret once, long ago, and Margaret got out of the car and walked around to the driver's side and got in. Dolly had slid over for her. Her aunt was right. Driving was easy. Before long Margaret was driving along and barely grinding gears at all.

“That’s the way it is,” Dolly said. “You think a thing is impossible, and then you find out any old silly-billy can do it. Even I can do it. Even you can do it. Given enough faith you can do the impossible, Margaret Murphy, and don’t you forget it.”

The next day, when they found themselves standing in front of that great big roaring waterfall, it seemed to them both that they had accomplished a miracle together, through faith alone. Margaret thought many thoughts. She expected her aunt was thinking the same thoughts. That night they stayed in a motel called “Little Ida’s Motor Lodge.” They chose it because the name delighted them, as did the big neon sign in front, of a sweet little girl surrounded by dancing flowers. There was a crackly sheet on the mattress in their room. “It could be this motel is one of those hourly places,” Aunt Dolly grumbled, but she did not explain. All night, when either one of them rolled over in the bed, the mattress crackled and woke them up. It wasn’t until about three in the morning that they finally fell asleep.

The next morning, as they made their way home with the thundering voice of the great falls still in their heads, Margaret was certain that no other day would ever come along in her life that would be so perfect and so happy.

“Maybe yesterday was the best day of our lives,” she said.

“I don’t believe it,” her aunt said. “I don’t think yesterday was the best day of your life. I expect great things of you, Margaret Murphy. Because you have suffered. There will come a day when you get your chance. You will atone. You will save a life. You will change the world for the better. I believe it. I’ve prayed over it. One day God is going to put the chance right there in front of you.”

No one had ever told Margaret that they expected great things of her before. She couldn’t change the past, but maybe one day she could make up for it. Her aunt was certain of it. Margaret felt like the good thief at Golgotha who had found forgiveness on the cross at the last skinny second, and she treasured her Aunt Dolly’s words all the way home, and pondered them in her heart.

*Your aunt never said any such thing—why do you insist on making up these pretty lies whenever I turn my back—*

Please let me tell it this way. Aunt Dolly would have wanted it to happen this way, if she could.

*No.*

Poor Deer sets her ungulate jaw against me.

All right, I say. Here is the truth.

\* \* \*

The truth is that Lois Leahy told Dolly there was no way in hell she'd lend her car to anyone, and didn't change her mind even after Dolly reminded Lois of the many favors Dolly had done for her over the years.

“Lois Leahy has put a small wrench in our plan,” Dolly said to Margaret, after hanging up the phone. “But not to worry.”

Aunt Dolly made the same thoughtful tsk-tsk sounds through her teeth she always made when thinking over a problem, and then she looked in the yellow pages under TRAVEL AGENCIES and dialed a number and asked the woman on the other end of the wire how to get to Niagara Falls without a car, which they didn't have, or a plane ticket, which they couldn't afford. The woman said that with a car the trip would take eleven hours, but without a car the trip would take twenty-seven hours by bus, one-way, and would require an overnight stay in Albany or Syracuse, take your pick.

“That's if you make all of your connections,” the woman said. “But wait, I see there is also the Annual Senior Bus Tour, from Bangor. The next one leaves in May. It's for the sixty-five-and-overs.”

Aunt Dolly hung up indignantly. Even Aunt Dolly wasn't sixty-five-and-over, and her niece wasn't remotely in the ballpark. She hated to be thwarted.

“Margaret, listen to me. We're going on a little holiday tomorrow, no matter what,” she said. “Tomorrow we will head out this door at the crack of dawn. We will take the first step

on our journey and then we'll see where that first step leads us.”

True to Aunt Dolly's promise they stepped out the door at the crack of dawn. The sun had just sullenly poked up from its resting place behind the untended woods. Maarten De Smedt's birds were cavorting in the mist while taking their morning exercise. Without much thought Margaret and Dolly walked to their usual bus stop, where they got on the next bus, which happened to be the bus that ran straight past the mill. It seemed a strange mockery to Dolly that they were heading in the direction of the mill since it was the last place she wished to go on their adventure.

When they came to their usual stop in front of the mill, the other ladies filed out of the bus half asleep and marched forward to their regular days. They were startled to see Dolly's face still in the bus window when the bus began to drive off. Dolly felt liberated. Her wild day of freedom and adventure had begun. She squeezed her niece's hand. It seemed obvious to them both that great things were about to happen. Already the day felt strange and reckless. Forty minutes later they came to a town called SILVER FALLS and Dolly said they were meant to get off there because even if Silver Falls was no Niagara Falls they would get to see a waterfall on their one wild day. They got off impulsively. They were primed for revelation. At first glance the town wasn't so different from their own town. There was a mill. There were many churches. The cardboard-colored houses were all the same.

“Let's find the waterfall,” Dolly said.

They ambled slowly, to give themselves time to look at everything. Whenever anybody came within shouting distance Aunt Dolly shouted: “Excuse me, which way is Silver Falls?” or “Can you tell me, please, how to get to Silver Falls?” The people of Silver Falls thought Dolly was suspicious, or maybe slow in the head, because of the way she kept asking how to get to the place she already was. They didn't consider that this misshapen woman with the turned-down mouth was asking how to get to an actual waterfall. Like many a town with a name like “Mountain View” with no view of mountains, or

“Springfield” with neither spring nor field, the town’s pretty name wasn’t meant to be taken literally.

After a while Dolly and Margaret found that town’s lunch counter and went in and ordered vanilla shakes. When they got to the bottom of the glass, they made rude slurping sounds to suck up the last bit through their straws, because they were on vacation and nobody knew them.

Dolly flagged down the waitress.

“Can you tell us how to get to the waterfall?” she said.

The waitress handed them their bill and said: “Ma’am, the closest waterfall is seventeen miles north, and dry this time of year.”

Dolly thanked her. She paid for the milkshakes.

Outside the afternoon breezes rustled through their hair, and the sky was filigreed.

“That’s right,” Dolly said. “Now we’ve seen Silver Falls.”

They didn’t speak again until they were back inside the little bus station of Silver Falls.

“Look at the benches inside this bus station!” Dolly exclaimed. “Margaret Murphy, aren’t these benches the most remarkable shade of yellow you’ve ever seen?”

“They are a remarkable yellow,” Margaret said.

“I will remember the color of these yellow benches for the rest of my life,” Dolly said.

“Me, too,” Margaret said. “Aunt Dolly, you should take a picture of these yellow benches.”

Dolly took out her Brownie camera and took a picture of those yellow benches.

*That’s right, Poor Deer says. That’s the way it really happened.*

“Thank you, Margaret, for coming with me on this adventure,” Aunt Dolly said. “I think that might have been the best day of my life.”

## Twenty

**WHEN SHE WAS FIFTEEN MARGARET QUIT SCHOOL AND BEGAN** working at the mill. She did it mostly out of respect for her aunt Dolly, who had quit school herself at fifteen and never looked back. Whenever Margaret was at work, her old incantatory wonderings came back, and she was happy. Each of the machines had its own rhythm, as regular as praying the Rosary, so regular that Margaret even began to imagine the world was a predictable place where good deeds led to good outcomes. On the east side of the yard lay the pulp mill, vast and hulking, where workers with big hooks dragged logs up from the river and turned them into pulpy mash and then dried the mash on hot steel rollers until it became paper in the end. Across from the pulp mill was the factory where Margaret and Dolly worked, packaging the napkins and throwaway menus. On her first day Margaret stood at the end of a chrome-steel machine and waited for the mechanic to start it up. She felt a sense of living purpose in the way the machine parts moved. A giant roll of paper was beginning to thread itself through the machine. Some throwaway menus came chomping out along two steel trays. Her job was to scoop up the paper menus, a hundred at a time, and package them up in boxes. On the first day Leroy Kelly, the foreman, was there to help. Leroy would step in, bored, whenever the paper things started falling off the ends of the trays because of Margaret's slowness. She got the hang of it eventually. She learned to follow the movement. The twist and bend of it. The need to yield to the machine. She moved and patterned herself into a continuous prayer, repetitive, circular, recited by the body. Her mind, emptied.

Each day when they got home, after their shift was done, Aunt Dolly and Margaret liked to watch *The Days of Our Lives* together on the television set in Florence's old bedroom,

sprawled out on Florence's bed, and one afternoon just after a commercial for floor wax came on Aunt Dolly kissed Margaret on the top of her head and hugged her in her white meaty arms.

"I love you, Margaret," she said.

"I love you, Aunt Dolly," Margaret said.

Margaret felt upended. Then she felt a sharp sadness, to have a body with borders, and to have this skin between her and the sensations coming from the outside world. Then she felt an exalted pleasure to think that her aunt loved her. The commercials ended. *The Days of Our Lives* came back on. The two of them settled down to watch. The pillows on the bed smelled like rosewater. Margaret might have dozed off because when she looked up again her aunt was eating barbecue-flavored potato chips and her mouth-corners were streaked with rust-colored dust.



## Twenty-One

**IN THE MORNING MARGARET AND AUNT DOLLY TOOK THE BUS** to the mill just like always but everything was different because the two of them were glowing with the knowledge that they loved each other.

“Oh, look, I’ve been assigned to the dispenser napkins,” Aunt Dolly said. “Come on, Margaret, let’s ask the boss if we can trade.”

Margaret loved nothing more than to be stationed at the dispenser napkin machine. It was the fastest machine on the floor and when Margaret worked there she had no time to think. Leroy Kelly said they could swap. Margaret took Dolly’s place making dispenser napkins, and Dolly took Margaret’s place making three-ply dinner napkins. Ninety minutes later a bolt came loose and flew across space and hit Dolly on the left temple. No one noticed her troubles until the three-ply dinner napkins began falling off the ends of their trays. A mechanic ran over and stopped the machine. Here was Dolly, flat on her back with her eyes open. She was blinking as if in sudden surprise. The mechanic’s name was Romeo Bowles. He was an old coot who had begun working at the mill when he was twelve and lied about his age to get the job. “Dolly?” he shouted—above the din of the other machines—and he knelt next to her and checked her pulse, which was elevated. He thought Dolly might have fainted from the heat. Maybe there was a pushed-in place on the left side of Dolly’s head but he wasn’t sure because her face was naturally peculiar.

Dolly sat up.

“My goodness!” she said.

She tried to stand on her own but Romeo told her to sit right back down until she was sure she wasn't hurt. The two of them sat on the floor together, sharing a moment.

"Does anything hurt?" Romeo shouted in her ear.

Dolly said she couldn't feel a thing. It wasn't an entirely accurate thing to say because Dolly was feeling something inside of her skull. A sullen, muddy fullness. Her perceptions of the world had recently evolved, in a way that fascinated her, and maybe should have alarmed her, but she had no perspective on the matter, being severely concussed. Dolly decided she felt all right. She told Romeo he should go on with his business and to stop fussing over her.

She tried to stand again and sat down when it was too much for her.

"I'll go get Leroy," Romeo shouted.

While waiting for Romeo to come back with Leroy, Dolly lost track of time entirely, and then she saw a little girl crouching next to her, staring intently into Dolly's eye. The girl's skin was blue.

*Awake, Oh Princess*, the little girl said sweetly.

Romeo came back with Leroy.

"What happened here, Dolly?" Leroy shouted, above the din.

Dolly could form no good answer. She wasn't sure what happened. She still hadn't put two and two together and concluded that the machine part on the concrete floor next to her had clocked her on the head. Leroy, who had been in charge of safety at the mill for the past twenty-seven years, picked up the machine part from the floor and put two and two together right away.

"How are you feeling?" Leroy shouted.

Dolly checked in with her feelings again. Her head was buzzing with unusual thoughts but she was in no pain.

"I'm all right," she said.

“You look a little woozy,” Leroy said. “A little out of sorts. Best be cautious. Best go home for the rest of this shift. You and Margaret can take the rest of the day off. Go home with your niece. Put some ice on it. Put your feet up. Take it easy, darling.”

The men helped Dolly up from the floor. Each of them held an elbow as they walked over to Leroy Kelly’s glass office in the corner and sat Dolly down. With the door shut behind them the sounds of the machines were pleasantly subdued.

“I feel fine now,” Dolly said.

Romeo went to fetch Margaret. Leroy sat next to Dolly with a concerned look on his features. It had been one hundred and seventeen days since the last accident and it always pained him when he needed to roll back the big numbers on the sign posted outside the mill. By afternoon every passing motorist would be reading a sign that said ZERO DAYS SINCE THE LAST ACCIDENT and would wonder who it was this time. By the time Margaret came back with Romeo the left side of Dolly’s face had swelled up. The swelling made the dent in her skull look less alarming.

“Poor Aunt Dolly!” Margaret said.

“It’s nothing,” her aunt said. “None of my teeth are affected!”

Dolly smiled and tapped her upper teeth to prove their soundness.

Leroy drove the two of them home.

“Take care, you two!” Leroy said, and drove off.

Dolly walked into the house on her own steam. She made a beeline for her favorite wingback armchair and slumped in it. Margaret went to the kitchen and collected ice from the freezer and wrapped it in a towel but by the time she came back her aunt was asleep. A few hours later Aunt Dolly woke up with a crick in her neck from sleeping in the chair but otherwise she felt fine. She said she wasn’t hungry and that she wasn’t in any pain. She just wanted to go back to sleep, in her own bed this

time. She climbed the stairs without any trouble and did her business in the bathroom and got into her nightclothes and crawled into bed.

“Just a small headache, that’s all,” she said. “The Lord must have been looking out for me. Tomorrow it’s back to work for us. I’m feeling like a slacker already. Idle hands—”

\* \* \*

Dolly woke up in the morning feeling dizzy. That was it for her symptoms, but when Margaret told her aunt she probably wasn’t ready to be standing up for an entire shift, Dolly nodded and went back to sleep.

Leroy Kelly called.

“Hello there, Margaret,” he said. “Tell Dolly to rest up. Tell her we love her.”

A doctor came, about three that afternoon. Leroy must have sent him. Dolly was wide awake by then and feeling her typical disdain for medical professionals.

“Who dragged you in?” she said.

“Aunt Dolly, just let him take a look at your head,” Margaret said.

The doctor performed his examination as circumspectly as possible.

“No dilation, no swelling,” he said. “I think you just need to rest up. I’ll call tomorrow to see how you feel.”

“Charlatan,” Dolly said.

About an hour later Dolly wandered out the front door while still in her nightclothes, on an urgent mission. Margaret didn’t hear her aunt leave. When a neighbor telephoned to let her know Dolly was wandering down the street in her nightclothes Margaret ran out and led her aunt back inside the house but her aunt felt irritated with Margaret and said so. “Don’t fuss with me, don’t fuss with me!” she said, and slapped at Margaret weakly around her head. The doctor came back. He said he wanted to order some tests but Dolly said she

had no interest in listening to a charlatan like him. Before the doctor left he spoke with Margaret in a hushed grim whisper.

“Your aunt should get those tests,” he said. “If she doesn’t get those tests, it’s her own funeral.”

“I’ll let her know,” Margaret said. “But I’m fairly certain she won’t listen.”

Just before sunset Dolly began to see a strange ungainly creature in the house. Huddled in a corner. Looking out from the mirrors. She reported to Margaret that the creature looked like a Big Deer but it was like no Big Deer that Dolly had ever seen. Its skin was blue. Its toes were clenched. “You leave my niece alone, you old beast!” she would shout at the empty corners of her room. “My niece is a good, dear girl! Listen up, you big old thing, I will be honest with you, what happened to that other girl was her own damn fault!”

Dolly’s voice sounded strange and sonorous inside her head. The bump had emptied her mind of all inconsequential thoughts. Words echoed and reverberated inside her skull before they found their way out of her mouth. Her head felt like a big empty airplane hangar. Sometimes the planes came. She could hear engines, and the whir of big propellers. Compared with the other noises in Dolly’s poor damaged head, the Big Deer’s voice almost soothed her.

She reported all these phenomena as they happened.

“This Big Deer does not forgive you, Margaret,” her aunt reported sadly. “I’ve tried and tried to get her to see reason.”

“That’s because it’s all my fault,” Margaret said. “If I hadn’t agreed to swap stations with you at the mill then you wouldn’t have been hit on the head. You once said I’d be the death of you, Aunt Dolly, and you were right.”

Her aunt looked at her gravely.

“Margaret, that’s the most cockamamie thing you’ve ever said in your life,” she said.

\* \* \*

On the third day Florence came back, driving herself home in Herb Grubb's fancy car. Herb Grubb had let Florence borrow his car because of her family emergency, and because he loved her, and because he owned another just-as-fancy car that he could drive while she was gone. Florence looked desperate and gaunt. She worried Herb Grubb would forget her while she was up north caring for her ailing sister. She worried her sister would die. Or that her sister would linger. None of these outcomes seemed fair to her.

Her sister spent her days in bed, reciting the Rosary in small throaty murmurs.

Dolly told Florence it felt like she had a basketball inside her head.

She grabbed Florence's hand and pressed it to her head, so that her sister could feel the basketball, too.

"A basketball with *teeth*," Dolly said. "Can you feel it?"

"Oh, you'll be all right," Florence said.

That afternoon Dolly fell in love with the taste of water. Margaret handed her aunt a glass of water and her aunt's eyes got big and she said: "Oh, what is this, Bunny? It's such a lovely color!" She spent long seconds admiring the water in the glass. Margaret could see one giant eye of Aunt Dolly's refracted through the glass to the other side. Her aunt drank the water in long noisy swallows, and after she drained the glass, she declared: "Why, that is the most delicious thing I have ever tasted," as if she had never before tasted water in her life.

By evening her aunt grew less interested in water, and more interested in repeating wise but random aphorisms to her niece.

"What goes around comes around," she said. "Everything happens for a reason."

Soon her aunt's advice grew more abstract.

"Time moves sideways through the most important moments of our lives," she said.

Margaret didn't know what to make of it.

Her aunt's eyes closed peacefully.

She appeared to stop breathing.

A minute passed and then another one and Margaret thought the end had come.

Her aunt opened her eyes and said plaintively: "Margaret, why ever didn't I stick with the game of golf? I could have been a champion!"

Her aunt fell into a placid doze.

Twelve minutes later she woke up and said: "Margaret, I need you!"

"Do you need more water, Aunt Dolly?"

Her aunt shook her head.

"No more water!" she said. "Margaret, listen to me! I have a thought! I'm *dead already!* I died on the day that boy walloped me in the head with his golf club! You're dead, too! You died all those years ago! You drowned under the ice!"

Margaret didn't contradict her aunt. She thought it might be true that she was dead already—it would explain a lot. Her aunt began to pray the Rosary fervently and with her eyes tightly shut. Margaret sat next to the bed, holding her aunt's hand, afraid to move or to interrupt, and listened to the repeating, rounded prayer: *Now and at the hour of our death now and at the hour of our death now and at the hour of our death*. She started saying the words in unison with her aunt. She wasn't praying so much as letting her aunt know that she was there and that she loved her. Her aunt squeezed her hand feebly, three times, as if to say: *Yes, I know you are here with me, and I love you, too*. The air was hot and hazy. Margaret could hear her mother on the phone downstairs, calling for the priest to come. Her voice floated up. "Dolly seemed so fine and chipper this morning, but now I'm just not sure, Father," her mother was shouting into the phone. "I keep telling her it might be serious! But you know Dolly! She thinks she is unkillable!"

Margaret felt stuck between two moments—the moment when her aunt was alive, and the moment-to-come, when her aunt would be gone for good. Then her mind hazed over with dull uncertain sorrow. She couldn't concentrate on the most important thing—that her aunt might be dying—for long. It was impossible for her to remain at the highest level of vigilance and emotion. Her aunt might not die for years. She might get better in a few minutes. Margaret couldn't maintain the same intense level of sadness when all was so uncertain.

Then Margaret's mind began to mull over her aunt's theory that the two of them were already dead. Maybe they had somehow stumbled into purgatory together by accident. She had always imagined purgatory would be exactly the kind of place that you could somehow stumble into by accident. If you knew for certain that you were in purgatory, then you'd know heaven was in the cards for you, and if you knew heaven was in the cards for you, then what kind of suffering was that? No suffering at all. God would have a more foolproof plan than that. Maybe her aunt had a point. It was possible.

Her thoughts of purgatory were interrupted by her aunt's prayers, which had suddenly grown more urgent. No longer was her aunt repeating endless rounding decades of the Rosary. Now Dolly was arguing with Saint Patrick himself. She could see him plainly. He was hovering there, just above her bed, and Dolly was trying to persuade him, through the power of prayer, that her time had not yet come. Her arguments were falling on deaf ears. Margaret loved her aunt—more than she loved her own mother—and this new understanding of how much she loved her aunt compelled her to lie down on her aunt's narrow, convent-style mattress and to hold Dolly tightly around her ample middle.

“Lovely girl,” her aunt said. “My dear, dear, lovely little girl.”

All the perpetual sorrows that lined her aunt's face went away for good and she looked as naively happy as a child.

“I see how it is, Bunny,” she said.

Margaret began to cry.



Dolly exhaled—the longest sigh imaginable. Margaret thought maybe she should run to tell her mother to come quick, but she didn't want to leave her aunt, who was probably, at that very moment, dying. She stayed where she was. She held her aunt fiercely, for as many minutes as it took to be certain that Dolly was well on her way to a better place.

Margaret went downstairs.

The priest had just come through the front door.

“Hurry, Father, hurry!” Florence said.

“Yes, you had better hurry,” Margaret said.

## Twenty-Two

**MARGARET WENT OUTSIDE. THE NIGHT WAS DARK AND** starless.

She saw Herb Grubb's fancy car parked in the driveway.

She opened the passenger-side door and sat down. Her mother's pocketbook was on the seat and she opened it to look for a cigarette, and when she couldn't find one, she looked in the glove compartment, but she still couldn't find one. She didn't want to think about what was going on inside the house but she couldn't help thinking about it. The priest was probably checking Dolly for body warmth before making his hasty preparations for last rites just in case there was a bit of Dolly left that hadn't already made its way to the final judgment. Her mother was probably praying stoically by the bed while taking fastidious care not to touch the body or to look her dead sister in the eye. Margaret was tempted to drive off somewhere in the night and never come back but then she remembered she had never learned to drive and that her dim memory of Aunt Dolly giving her a driving lesson while on the way to Niagara Falls was probably no more real than a made-up story, and so she got out of the car and began to walk. Anywhere. It didn't matter. Before long she found herself picking her way through the untended woods on the path to see Maarten De Smedt. The moon was up and it lighted her way. It was late, though, and Maarten De Smedt's house was dark, and instead of knocking on his door Margaret opened the door to the pigeon loft and stepped inside. The birds barely stirred. It was as if they remembered her. They were dim shapes in the dark with their feathers puffed out in slumber, resting in roosts or in their own little boxes where they had built nests. Margaret sat on the same little stool where she had

sat as a child. She watched the birds sleeping, until she fell asleep herself.

In the morning a big silver-winged bird with an enormous wattle flew to the top of her head and began to comb through her hair with its beak, waking her.

Maarten De Smedt came in with a bucket of feed, looking more than ever like a crabbed little troll from a fairy tale.

When Margaret stood up, she was taller by half a foot.

“Oh,” Maarten De Smedt said. “I’ve missed you, girl.”

They didn’t hug. It wasn’t their way.

It seemed natural to Margaret that, after her night of grief and loss, she would want to visit Maarten De Smedt every day, just like in the old days, to help with his champions. She came in the morning before her shift at the mill. She came in the evening after she got home from work. She thought it a miracle how easily and perfectly the two of them became friends again—maybe even more of a miracle than if that pigeon had come back from heaven with a message for her from Agnes Bickford. The years passed swiftly and Maarten De Smedt kept getting older and older until Margaret was taking care of him as much as she was taking care of his birds. When he died he left his house and his birds to Margaret Murphy. The inside of Maarten De Smedt’s house was painted sky-blue on every wall and ceiling and she kept it that way. He had collected beer steins throughout his life—his second beloved hobby—and they lined the shelves, and she dusted them. She took care of the birds the way he had taught her. In the winter she was out in the loft by five every morning, to break the ice that formed on top of their water feeders and to clean the nesting boxes. She kept to herself. She was happy. She was less and less interested in the goings-on of other people. She came to be known as the fabled screeching bird-lady who might come flying in through the window at night to steal a finger from a naughty child.

The days passed.

One day a little girl came through the untended woods,  
making her ambling way across the mealy potato field like a  
little goat, and she was led by the birds—

No.

*Maarten De Smedt died when you were eight.*

*His birds were sold to a restaurant in Bangor.*

*Again—*

\* \* \*

When Margaret went outside she saw Herb Grubb's fancy car  
parked in the driveway. She opened the passenger-side door to  
look for a cigarette and saw her mother's pocketbook sitting  
there on the front seat. Margaret opened it and rummaged  
through. She didn't find a cigarette but she found three  
hundred dollars in twenties and a letter from Ruby Bickford.  
She unfolded the letter as carefully as she could, but even so it  
had been unfolded and folded so many times that it almost fell  
apart in her hands, and the letter began: *Florence, sometimes I  
remember how we used to be—*

\* \* \*

*Florence, sometimes I remember how we used to be. I wish I  
could just pick up the phone and hear your voice but I'm so  
afraid of what you'd say to me. I'm so afraid. I don't know  
what got into me to accuse your child of such a terrible thing.  
I was crazed with grief. Dearest love, is there nothing I can do  
to make up for the terrible things I said about your girl? Will  
you ever let me try to make it up to you? Is it wrong to long for  
you more than I long for my own child? Some days I can  
barely remember Agnes. She feels like a little angel come to  
me who then flew back to heaven. When I remember her funny  
ways I can't stop crying but the tears leave me feeling better in  
the end. I can almost feel Agnes up there in heaven, forgiving  
me. When I think of you, though, Florence, I cry in a  
completely different way, because you are here on this earth,  
alive, and you will never forgive me.*

\* \* \*

Margaret read the letter through to the end. She read it again. She studied the envelope. The return address was in Sandusky, Ohio. Sandusky must have been where Ruby Bickford had gone when she went west to live with her brother. Margaret folded the letter back up. She put it back in its envelope. Her story was flying off in unexpected directions and she didn't have the strength to rein it back in. She was so tired and befuddled. She had been the death of her aunt. She had killed Agnes Bickford. She had just learned that she'd destroyed her mother's friendship with Ruby Bickford, and how much that friendship had meant to them both. She was close to falling into one of those terrible states of mind where a person knows there is no hope and they might as well end it. She opened the car door and climbed out. She started walking. Her mind was shrieking with grief and guilt. After a while she was walking along the river. She passed the mill and thought about all the people working the night shift in there who didn't yet know that Aunt Dolly was dead.

Many steps later she found herself standing in front of the Mid-Town Bar and she pulled the heavy door open and went in. It was the first time in her life she had been inside the Mid-Town Bar and it fit her wild idea of it perfectly. There was a long bar along one side with revolving stools, just like at the lunch counter down the street. There were scattered tables where men were hunched over their beers and smoking their Lucky Strikes. There were walls covered with pictures of matadors painted on black velvet. Margaret sat down on the stool closest to the door and ordered a sloe gin fizz. It was a drink she had heard about once.

"I can't make a sloe gin fizz without an egg, and we're fresh out," said the man behind the bar. "And anyway, you're too young for me to serve you alcohol, Margaret Murphy."

The man poured her a root beer.

Margaret took a sip and looked around. Throughout her life she had been continually surprised by the way everyone in town knew her name, including this man behind the bar. She was famous not only for her missing finger but also for a sticky rumor that Ruby Bickford had spread, ages ago—a

story that was still floating around town about how Margaret killed a child in cold blood. Half of the men in the Mid-Town Bar were men she knew from the mill. The other half of them knew her by reputation. All of them were looking at her with wide-eyed surprised pale faces, ashamed to be caught in there by Dolly's niece. It was as if one of their own children had caught them. They wanted to ask her about Dolly but were afraid to speak up because if they skulked alone at their tables without acknowledging her presence, then they could almost pretend they weren't there. They looked away.

A skinny man with long sparse whiskers sat down on the barstool next to Margaret and offered her a cigarette. It was a menthol, though, and she didn't want it. She didn't know him.

The man sat there, lazily revolving on the stool, back and forth, with his cigarette squeezed between his lips.

"Where is your boyfriend tonight?" he said.

Margaret knew it was a trick question and she didn't answer.

"Leave that girl alone," somebody called out.

"How much do I owe for the root beer?" Margaret said to the man behind the counter.

"Don't worry, I got you, baby," the skinny man said.

"Okay," Margaret said, and went out.

Before Margaret had walked a dozen steps, she felt someone holding her by the elbow, as if to walk along with her, or to help her across the street, or to guide her elsewhere.

It was the skinny man.

"I could complain about your cold ways, but I'm not that sort," he said. "I say to myself: what's that girl up to, wandering into a bar by herself at this time of night? Maybe she needs help. I buy her a drink."

Margaret started to cry. It might have been because of her aunt. It might have been because she was afraid. The two of them had stopped in the middle of the street because Margaret's legs had stopped doing what they were told. There

was no traffic. There wasn't anything, except for the church, across the street, staring down at them blankly. Now the man was holding her maimed hand in his regular hand. He didn't even remark. His hand was warm. With his other hand he patted her bottom.

"Come on, let me drive you home, at least," he said. "You look like you need a ride."

The cab of his truck smelled of motor oil. He wasted no time pulling down her pants and he stuck three fingers inside. He moved his arm back and forth, pumping her.

"It's all right, baby, relax"—

*No.*

*Maybe this is the story you think you deserve, Margaret. But it's not what happens to you.*

*You have got to go back and steal that fancy car.*

*Now. Go—*

\* \* \*

Margaret saw the keys hanging from the ignition and thought: I have got to steal Herb Grubb's fancy car—and without wasting any more time wondering whether she had ever really learned to drive or not she drove straight to the Mid-Town Bar and went inside. Along the way she ground the gears a few times but not too badly. A skinny man bought her a root beer and Margaret drank it and left so quick that by the time the skinny man followed her outside to complain about her cold ways she was already spinning out of the parking lot. The skinny man slammed on the trunk with his fist just before Margaret drove off but there was nothing he could do. A half dozen men had followed the skinny man out there on account of a vast new tribal alliance they felt with that girl in the car, Dolly's niece, a feeling that had just welled up in them that very night. They had formerly dismissed the girl as a freakish nine-fingered little killer but now that she worked at the mill she was one of their own. Margaret didn't stay to thank them. She was on her way to a better place. She didn't want to go

home. Her aunt was dead. She drove in the opposite direction of home, along the river road.

Margaret kept going.

About midnight Margaret saw Poor Deer in her rearview mirror, loping along after her, keeping time, galloping closer—

And all that Margaret had ever forgotten about her childhood, returned.

And now I have nearly caught up with my story. Days ago I found myself driving along the river road, in a stolen car, in the dark, filled with grief for my poor Aunt Dolly, and watching in my rearview mirror as Poor Deer came galloping, galloping, ever closer—keeping time with her hooves—

And on that night, even as I traveled toward my uncertain future, I began to have faith that some greater purpose was waiting for me, ahead.



# Ordinary Time

## Twenty-Three

AN HOUR PASSED AND I FELT CALMER. I KEPT DRIVING SOUTH, and west. I checked in the rearview mirror and I couldn't see Poor Deer following me any longer. I thought I had outrun her but then I sensed a presence, weird and dank, and there she was in the car with me, Poor Deer herself. Somehow this creature had caught up and had oozed her way through the barest skinny cracks in the windows of Herb Grubb's fancy car and now she was hunched uncomfortably in the seat next to me.

*You are on your way to Niagara Falls, Poor Deer said. Niagara Falls is where you will finally reckon with your past.*

I could barely see the road. Her snorting breaths were fogging the windshield.

“What do you mean, I'm on my way to Niagara Falls?” I said.

Poor Deer didn't answer. She just nodded her head aimlessly. She looked like a great big bobble-head. And yet the idea of driving to Niagara Falls—the very place where my poor dead aunt had wanted to travel, and had never had the chance, in life—seemed like an answer to a question I had yet to ask myself, and the question was: “Where are you going, Margaret Murphy?” I was on my way there already. I was traveling south and west, the only two options available to me without driving to another country, or into the ocean, and it was also the direction where I would eventually come to Niagara Falls. What better place to mourn the death of my aunt than somewhere she had never traveled, beyond any experience either of us had known in the course of our tiny lives? When I put it to myself that way, the idea of driving to

Niagara Falls in Herb Grubb's fancy car felt inevitable, the way sudden snow everywhere descending on the first true day of winter feels inevitable. I had already pored over the relevant maps with my aunt Dolly in anticipation of a trip that never happened. In the most-true ways I had traveled this same route before, in my dreams and in my made-up stories. And whether Aunt Dolly had ever truly said that driving was not so difficult, I was beginning to believe she had been correct, because the car listened to me, and drove me to where I wanted to go.

A few hours later Poor Deer and I crossed a state line into New Hampshire, and the road narrowed. The dark trees hugging either side and hanging over the road grew denser and the air was laden with fresh mysteries. The moon grew rounder. I passed a sign that said ENTERING VERMONT, and then, not so many miles later—ENTERING NEW YORK. That is how it was in those parts. Nothing happened for years on end and then things happened quickly one after another. Once we were in New York the moon disappeared and rain began to come down in big pelting plops until the road was dark and slick. The rain reminded me that my Aunt Dolly was dead. I pulled off the road and cut the engine and crawled into the back seat and cried. I should have hidden my stolen car better from the road but I was too tired. I heard trucks passing on the road, kicking up splashes with their wheels.

At some point Poor Deer unfolded herself from the front seat and got out to stretch her legs and I locked the doors behind her because I wanted to grieve in solitude. I heard her snuffling outside at the window cracks but I'd rolled the windows up tight. Her hooves splashed loudly in the muddy puddles by the car, and she shouted: *Little girl, little girl, let me come in!* many times, in an impatient, imperious voice. I closed my eyes tighter. I ignored her pleas. Eventually I fell asleep.

At dawn I sat up and looked out. Poor Deer was gone. The rain had become more civilized by then. There were cornfields on either side. I got out and did my business in the corn and came back to the car. I looked in Herb Grubb's trunk for something warm to wear, because I was cold. There was a

man's jacket in there, with a swank feel to it. I put it on and felt swank myself.

It seemed to me I was less interested in driving anywhere specific that morning. I felt very ridiculous to find myself in a cornfield in the state of New York with a stolen car in my possession. I was weighed down by the suspicion that I did not know how to drive, and that I had finally fallen so deep into one of my made-up stories that I'd never find my way out again. Everything felt hopeless. I fell into a funk. But then I remembered in a flash how my Aunt Dolly had told me once that she expected great things of me. Maybe I was finally beginning to figure out how to untie the impossible knot of a problem that had tied me up, for all the years of my life—beginning with my original sin, the death of Agnes. When I finally did find a way to untie that impossible knot, then all the most important questions in life would be answered. Why we love. Why we suffer. How we make sense of the happenings in our lives. The stories we tell ourselves to make it through to the next day. Why we press on, even after all hope is lost.

I came to a town with a little white church on a hill and where the rain had become so delicate and attenuated that the drops blew sideways and stuck on people's hair and on their felt hats. I stopped for gas. I filled the tank and paid with cash from my mother's pocketbook. It was the kind of morning where anything could happen. Knowing it was that kind of morning, I was on the lookout for something remarkable to fall into my lap.

Poor Deer had snuck her way back into the car while I was in the lavatory.

I was unhappy to see her but not surprised.

*I suppose you think you can get to the end of this story without me, she said. Well, you can't. You'll lose your way. You'll lose your moral compass.*

Just as we were about to drive out of town, we came to a crossroads where a woman and a little girl were standing at a bus stop. They looked miserable and drenched, and as if they

had been standing in the rain for many years, waiting for me to come along and rescue them.

Poor Deer gave out a startled cry.

*Stop! There they are!* Poor Deer said.

I pulled over.

“Who?” I said.

*Penny and Glo. Time to rescue them. Go offer them a ride.*

\* \* \*

I got out of the car reluctantly and walked back to the bus stop, feeling foolish. Poor Deer wasn't explaining herself very well. I suspected she had just made up a story of her own about this woman and this girl to give herself credibility.

I said to the drenched woman: “Can I give you a ride?”

“Where are you going?” the woman said.

She was older than I was but not by much. Her hair was long and perfectly straight and her nose was crooked in two places. She was carrying a duffel bag in one hand and holding the girl's hand in the other. The girl stared up at me and put a thumb in her mouth and took it out again moistly. I noticed all these things at once. They were shivering from the cold. Their skin was blue and pimples. They certainly did look in need of rescue. Poor Deer was right about that.

“I'm going to Niagara Falls,” I said.

“That's where we're going!” the woman cried.

The two of them ran over to Herb Grubb's fancy car and scrambled into the back seat together. It was as if they knew the front passenger seat was already occupied by an imaginary deer. I wondered whether I was about to be the hero of this story. We started off.

“Can you put the heat on back here?” the woman said.  
“My girl and I are soaked.”

*We'll be there by evening,* Poor Deer said.

“Look, you’re driving awfully slow,” the woman said. “Even that farmer on his old tractor just tried to pass you.”

I sped up a little. Not very much. I was still a reluctant driver. They told me their names—the woman’s name was Penny and the girl’s name was Glo.

Three hours later we came to a place called Little Ida’s Motor Lodge, eleven miles east of Niagara Falls.

*Stop here*, Poor Deer said.

“Let’s stop here!” Glo said.

I think Glo liked the big garish neon sign outside the check-in window. I didn’t mind the idea of stopping there. It was already dark. I was tired of driving. Even if we weren’t all the way to Niagara Falls, we were close enough to call it a day.

That night I began to write my confession, while Penny and Glo slept in the big bed. I wrote all night. Poor Deer stayed awake with me, nipping at my hair with her yellow nubs of teeth whenever I strayed from the truth—until morning came, when from behind the torn curtain the dawn began to weep through, and Poor Deer diminished, until her voice was no more forceful than soft tears—

And then she was gone.

There were just three of us, here in this room: Penny, and Glo, and me.

And I have completely caught up with my story.

\* \* \*

Penny woke up first and began to tease me about how I’d stayed up all night.

“You’re right where I left you when I went to sleep,” Penny said. “Didn’t you ever come to bed?”

She asked me if I wanted to come with her and Glo to get something to eat. I shook my head. Now that I had caught up with my story, I needed to see it through.

“Not hungry?” Penny said. “Then can I borrow a couple of twenties?”

Penny took a hundred dollars from my mother's pocketbook. I watched her do it. Five twenties. Not a couple of twenties. She saw me seeing it and shrugged and stuffed the money in her front pocket. I didn't mind. The money wasn't mine to begin with.

Glo climbed into my lap as if we were family and threw her sticky arms around my neck.

"Come on, Glo," Penny said. "Leave that girl alone."

After Penny left with Glo and with a hundred dollars in her pocket, I wasn't sure whether I would see them again. Our relationships were still loose and circumstantial. The day before, Poor Deer had urged me to give the two of them a ride and I still didn't know why. After I had checked in and got my key, I had unlocked the door of room 127, and Penny and Glo had come right inside the room with me, exactly as if we had already discussed it. That was all right. It was what I wanted to happen. Without them I would have been alone with my grief. Now that they were here, I could pretend the three of us were on a jolly jaunt to Niagara Falls together. It was almost as if we had planned it together all along.

## Twenty-Four

A DAY CAME WHEN PENNY AND GLO AND I FINALLY WENT TO see Niagara Falls. I'd been worried that the authorities would be on the lookout for Herb Grubb's fancy car and would pull me over and throw me in jail as soon as the car was spotted on the road, and that would be the end of my story, and that's why I'd been reluctant to drive anywhere once we reached the safe haven of Little Ida's Motor Lodge. But one morning I was finally ready to chance it. Niagara Falls was what we had come to see, after all. So far no one had shown up to arrest me for stealing Herb Grubb's fancy car. Luckily for me, on the way to Niagara Falls there were no sirens. No police cars followed behind. I didn't need the map. It was easy to find the way because every car on the road was converging toward the same place on the globe and we'd all come for the same reason: to be transported. I could have found my way to Niagara Falls by following the sound alone, this low ominous rumble, this bass-note voice of a waterfall, which even when we were miles away made the earth jitter and the air grow dense with moisture. And then we were there. The three of us lined up in a row behind an iron railing with many other people and we watched the water boil and tumble down into the mist. I thought about all the people who had fallen in, throughout history, both accidentally and on purpose, and survived. Then I found myself thinking about my Aunt Dolly. I prayed to her. I said to her spirit: Look, Aunt Dolly. We made it. We're here.

After that I stopped thinking in words. I just watched the whole big tumble. Sometimes my eye was caught by one unique splash of water, the shape of it, and my eye followed it down and down until it disappeared into the mist and was no more. But there is only so much splendor a person can fathom,



and at some point I began to feel a little bored by the waterfall with its constant overwhelming sameness, and I began to think about how much Penny reminded me of Agnes.

There. I'd admitted it.

True: Penny's hair is not the color of curdled milk. It is the color of dead leaves along a woodland path. But even so, Penny reminded me achingly of my childhood friend. It's because of the way she moved. *Fearless. Rash. Insouciant.* For days now I had been trying to find the right words for Penny. She wasn't beautiful but people tracked her with their eyes. I was still trying to think of the right word for Penny when she climbed casually over the railing in front of us, the one marked DO NOT CROSS, and gave a small hop down to the other side. Maybe she wanted an unobstructed view of the falls. The slick wet stone she was standing on was less than a dozen feet from the abyss. Glo tried to follow her mother over the railing but I wouldn't let her, and when I gripped her arm, too tightly, she spun around and tried to bite me.

A man wearing an official yellow slicker came running up, blowing on his whistle and shouting—"Miss! Miss! You can't be out there! Come back or I'll cite you!"

Penny looked over her shoulder and smiled—what kind of smile was it?—*sublime*, or maybe, *desperate*—and took three steps toward the edge. Big bold steps. Now she was standing at the slippery brink of disaster. The whistle dropped from the man's lips and he whispered *Oh, no, honey, no.* Penny looked at me. It was a look meant just for me, I was sure of it. I was also sure that her look was saying: *I'm sorry. Take care of her.* A tick-tock moment came, when I was certain she was going to do it—and then the moment passed. Instead of throwing herself into oblivion, Penny shrugged. She sauntered back toward us. *Nonchalant. Cynical. Hopeless.* She swung a leg over the rail. She came back to the land of the living. Glo hugged her mother around the legs and sobbed. That small girl understood the moment perfectly. I wanted to believe that Penny had never been about to hurl herself over the edge, but I knew better, and the whistle man's face was gray.

He gathered himself.

“People die out there all the time, young lady,” he said. “They think rules don’t apply to them. They slip, they fall, they’re dead. I’m going to let you off with a warning this time. But pull that stunt again and I will cite you for trespassing. The land on the other side of this railing is federal land. The fine is two hundred dollars.”

He walked away haggardly.

Everyone was looking at us as if we were fugitives and in my case they were right. Niagara Falls was pretty much ruined for us after that. We found the car and drove to the motel without discussing whether we should have taken the *Maid of the Mist* boat ride or not. When we got back to Little Ida’s we ate at the Automat across the street. Glo had peanut butter and jelly. Penny had egg salad again. I had fried bologna on rye. The Automat was that kind of modern eating establishment where you stick coins in a slot and slide a plastic window open and grab your food from its little receptacle. The food selections were stacked up in columns. There was a HELP WANTED sign tacked to the wall. I could see people working in back. They were wearing uniforms and hairnets. Some were making the sandwiches. Some were arranging food on plastic plates and adding sprigs of parsley. Some were taking the dirty plates and lining them up in a giant conveyor belt of a dishwasher. I began to imagine what it would be like to work at the Automat myself. I spun a magnificent story for myself about Penny and Glo and me living together at Little Ida’s for the long term. Glo would go to school. Penny would be my wife. I would work at the Automat and bring home the bacon. I would take care of them both. We would be happy together. I would deliver Penny from her despair. I would save Glo from her fears.

When we came out of the Automat, we heard lively music blasting from outdoor speakers and it felt like a joyful message just for me, telling me that I was right, and that all would be well. Instinctively we began to walk toward the sound because maybe it was our chance to save a day that had been prematurely marred by whistles and dashed expectations. Penny and I were holding Glo’s hands and swinging her along between us when we came to one of those little itinerant

amusement parks, the kind that spring up overnight in vacant lots only to be torn down the next day. Glo wanted to go on the carousel. She rode on a dragon, or maybe it was a kind of fish, and Penny and I waved each time she came around again. After the carousel ride was done, the three of us rode together on the squeaky little Ferris wheel. We were at the very top of the wheel when Glo pointed at the ground wildly.

“Mommy! I can see Sam Snickers!” she yelled.

Penny looked down.

It seems to me, when I look back now on those seconds when the three of us were suspended high above the world, that this was the moment when Penny made up her mind about what kind of life-story she wanted for herself.

She put her arm around Glo and hugged her.

“Oh, honey, it couldn’t have been Sam Snickers you saw,” she said. “You must have seen somebody else!”

After we went back to Little Ida’s that night, and after Glo went to sleep, Penny kissed me on my missing finger, many times.

Then she showed me her bruises.

\* \* \*

I feel an ominous turn in this story coming. It’s looming over my future. I’m running out of time to find my happy ending. Poor Deer is giving me no guidance. She no longer interrupts my progress with caustic interjections or snide objections. At the moment my musty nemesis is nodding off in the corner. Her soft exhalations fill room 127 of Little Ida’s Motor Lodge with a pastoral peacefulness. She mumbles something incoherent in her sleep and sticks her long slow tongue out and licks her black nose and then she snuffles and sighs and tucks her head back under one hoof. Penny and Glo are sleeping the way they always do, all tangle-legged and a-tumble with their hair flung across the pillows. I’m rubbing the tip of my missing finger. I’m remembering the smell of bacon grease. I’m remembering a time when my mother loved me.

Penny wakes up and turns in the bed and looks at me. It's three o'clock in the morning and she can't believe I'm still sitting here at this rickety desk.

“Did the light wake you?” I say.

She stretches and sits up, and yawns, and comes over. She picks up my latest pages and begins to read, or tries to read. My secret ciphers stymie her for the most part.

“You are the strangest girl I have ever known,” she says sleepily.

Over Penny's shoulder I see Poor Dear coming toward us, and I think she is about to strike out at Penny with her hooves—but all she does is breathe some soft warm breaths on the back of Penny's neck, so gently that Penny doesn't notice, and then she looks at Penny with something like benevolent affection before she trots back to her corner and flops down again.

I don't know what to make of it.

Penny is oblivious.

Glo sleeps through it all.

Penny goes back to bed.

Once again I'm the only one awake in this little rented room. My thoughts and imaginings begin to gallop off in all directions. I keep thinking Penny is just waiting until the day when I run out of money, and then she'll go back to Sam Snickers. I push the thought away as quickly as I can, though, because Sam Snickers is a monster. Glo told me that on the day they ran away from home Sam Snickers threw a plate at Penny's head because she had buttered his saltines on the wrong side. The plate missed Penny's head but she knew from experience that Sam Snickers was ramping up for an argument later in the day and that she would get the short end of the stick again. A broken wrist. A loose tooth. Maybe less. Maybe more. Instead of waiting to find out, she took her girl and fled. Even as I've been busy writing my story, I've learned Penny's story. Penny's story is more tragic than mine because there is very little goodness or love in it. Even in the most terrible

chapters of my life I have always known a certain, savage beauty—in the color of the sky, the sense of birds flying close to my ear, the feel of the soft-loam earth and the joy of running through the untended woods until I became more animal than spirit. Penny has known none of those things. *I wish Sam Snickers would leave me alone*, Penny says sometimes. *Sometimes I wish Sam Snickers was dead*. Penny's life has been one of iron walls and concrete dead-ends and she has never done anything to deserve it.

But then I remind myself that all of those hopeless chapters in Penny's life have come to an end, and she's come to the best part of her story at last, because I've rescued her. I've rescued Glo. They never need to worry about Sam Snickers again.

*And then you rescued us and we lived happily together for the rest of our days*, Penny might have said to me, if I'd asked her how I should end this story.

I think it's a very good ending.

And so: I will end my story here.

I write these last words of my confession with a flourish—*I will end my story here*—and throw down my pen—ecstatic—

Poor Deer rises up from her slumber in a fury and she rushes over to this rickety desk and slaps me many times with her sharp hooves.

*Your story isn't over yet, Margaret Murphy—I've brought you here for a reason—*

Poor Deer leans in, so close that I see her in an entirely new light.

*And now I'm going to tell you the story of what happens next*, she says.

*It's the story of how you are going to kill Sam Snickers.*

## Twenty-Five

**I'M GOING TO KILL SAM SNICKERS? I SAID.**

I wasn't sure if Poor Deer had thought her plan through. Maybe I had heard her wrong. How would I kill Sam Snickers? How would I know where to find Sam Snickers? I felt trapped and uncertain and I was very tired but some part of me was already accepting that Poor Deer had led me here to this place and time for one reason alone: to kill Sam Snickers.

*It solves everything, Poor Deer said. If you don't kill Sam Snickers, then he's going to kill these two before the end of the day and you will have rescued no one and you will have the blood of two more innocent lives on your hands.*

Her eyes were burning red embers. Her smile was horrible.

Are you my angel or my devil? I whispered.

*I am Poor Deer, she said. Here is the rest of the story. Listen carefully. It begins like this: The next morning Margaret took Glo down to the river, to see the frogs—*

## Twenty-Six

**THE NEXT MORNING MARGARET TOOK GLO DOWN TO THE** river to see the frogs. They couldn't see the river from room 127 but they knew the river was there because they had seen it on the free map they found in their room just under the Gideon Bible. Each night they had listened to the frogs singing raucously over the traffic sounds and above the angry voices from other rooms at Little Ida's. There were insect sounds, too: the trill of cicadas; the whine of mosquitoes; and there was the rich smell of moving water wafting up from that direction, a scent that Margaret would have recognized anywhere, having grown up in a mill town along a river. All these things were signs that the river was real.

To get to that river Margaret and Glo needed to walk carefully through the broken bottles and abandoned coolers and trash that other people had thrown away behind Little Ida's. Margaret held Glo's hand. When they came to a swampy place, Glo didn't want her shoes to get mud on them and so Margaret carried her. A dozen steps later they came to a little river nearly choked by cattails. The sound of the frogs stopped at once. It was as if all of the frogs on the riverbank had decided to quit croaking at once, and had communicated their decision to remain silent telepathically to one another, until they determined what these two humans meant to do, and whether they posed any danger to the frog kingdom. Then all at once the frogs began again—some voices throaty and low, and others piping up in piccolo range—and Margaret knew she and Glo had been accepted into that kingdom. She put the girl down on a dry spot. She tried to see the pattern of the river, and to make sense of it. It was a very different kind of river from the river she had once drowned in. Whereas the river she had once drowned in was a bilious yellow river full of

effluvial waste and ice chunks, this river was green and full of living things. As her eyes grew used to the patterns of light and green, Margaret suddenly saw there was a big old bullfrog watching them from a smooth wet stone not a foot away from where they stood.

“Look,” Margaret whispered.

She gestured to Glo with the slightest tilt of her head. That old bullfrog was as big as a house cat. The girl knew how to be quiet. Margaret wondered where she had learned it—she was as still and quiet as the frog himself. Glo squatted down—ever so slowly—and ever so slowly she reached a hand out toward the old bullfrog until she touched its back. Maybe it was the first and last time she would ever touch a frog by the side of a river. She looked up at Margaret with big eyes.

Then the frog leaped. The frog flew. Never had a frog made such a mighty leap. They heard a plop-and-splash, somewhere in the cattails, and all the frog kingdom stopped singing again, all at once. All was still. Margaret and Glo looked at one another and said nothing. They were part of the stillness, the two of them together. Margaret looked at the girl and thought: For some reason I have been gifted with another miracle of a day, where I am as happy and astonished with the world as I was on the day of the schoolyard flood.

But moments of pure astonishment are a fleeting gift, impossible for humans to hang on to—just like moments of pure grief, or pure rage, or any other kind of pure feeling—all of them dissipate and disappear, as quick as they came—and Margaret became aware of the many mosquitoes landing on her arms and ankles, and behind her ears, and so did Glo. Their moment of astonishment was over. Together they made their way back to the concrete-and-macadam world from where they had come, but they felt closer to each other than before, because they had shared this sweet secret: that a place of watery rainbows lay hidden just beyond the trash and broken things.

When they got back to room 127 Penny was talking into the telephone by the bed.



She hung up quickly.

“That was Sam Snickers, wasn’t it,” Margaret said.

“You’re still a child,” Penny said. “When you’re my age, you’ll understand.”

“Let’s leave now,” Margaret said. “We can go west.”

“I want to stay,” Penny said. “Let’s stay another day at least. I like it here.”

Her attitude was so cold that Margaret was afraid to broach the idea about staying together permanently and becoming a little family, just the three of them. Maybe the idea would feel less ridiculous if she went over to the Automat and asked for a job. If Margaret had a job, then the three of them could stay right here and be as happy as if they had fallen into one of Margaret’s happiest made-up stories.

“Maybe I’ll see about getting a job at the Automat,” Margaret said. “Then we can stay a long time.”

“Now, why would I want to stay here a long time?” Penny said. “I’m going places, Margaret!”

She was laughing at Margaret’s fine joke. She thought Margaret wasn’t serious. Then she stopped paying attention to Margaret altogether and got busy adjusting the rabbit ears on the television for better reception. Margaret could tell that her idea of the three of them becoming a little family really was just another one of her made-up stories, after all. Poor Deer had a different story in mind altogether, a story where Margaret would kill Sam Snickers. *A life for a life.*

Margaret still wanted to believe in her own story, though, and so she walked across the street and told the manager she was looking for a job. She was prepared to give the manager a made-up name in case the police were on the lookout for a car thief named Margaret Murphy but he didn’t ask her name. He only asked her to show him her fingernails. He wanted to be sure her hygiene was good enough to work in the field of food preparation. Once Margaret’s nails passed muster he told her she was hired.

“I will start you at the training rate,” he said. “Everyone starts at the training rate. You’re responsible for buying your own hairnet and uniform. The cost will come out of your first paycheck. Checks are cut every other Friday.”

“All right,” Margaret said.

The manager scheduled her to work that same evening. Her shift would begin in an hour and a half. They shook on it.

When Margaret came out from the Automat, she looked across the street and saw that the door to room 127 was wide open. There was a man standing in the doorway, leaning nonchalantly on the jamb. Margaret ran over there as fast as she could because she knew something terrible was about to happen. Her breaths were coming in heaves by the time she got there and she couldn’t speak. The man looked at her without much interest. His eyes were shallow disks. He was chewing on a wooden match.

Penny came out of the room. She walked right by Margaret and threw her duffel bag in the open trunk of a car.

“We’ll settle this when we get home,” the man said to Penny.

Penny got in front. Glo was already in the back seat.

“You’re Sam Snickers,” Margaret said.

*A life for a life*, Poor Deer said.

Sam Snickers got in and slammed the door and backed out.

Sam Snickers was about to drive away with Penny and Glo.

And that would be the end of the story.

*Get into Herb Grubb’s fancy car and run it straight into his back fender—that will get his attention—*

Margaret got into Herb Grubb’s fancy car and started it. She backed out and then she put her foot down hard. Herb Grubb’s car slammed into Sam Snickers’s tail. The noise was tremendous. She backed up and waited. It was up to Sam Snickers now. He could drive away, and live. Instead he got

out. That decided his fate. He was coming at her and yelling. Margaret drove straight at him. This time the impact made no sound. All she could see of Sam Snickers was one arm, flung up. The rest of him was hidden by the hood of Herb Grubb's car. She backed up and drove forward. She felt the front wheel lift and then land on the other side of the obstruction. Forward and back. A few times more. She wasn't sure she had done the job correctly until she felt a *pop* under the left front wheel as if she'd popped a paper bag and Penny was screaming.

\* \* \*

Poor Deer had come to the end of her story.

I didn't know what to make of it.

Is that what is going to happen next? I said.

*You will give up your own life to save those two. No greater love hath a girl like you than to lay down her life for her friends. It's the greatest story ever told.*

How do you know all these things?

*I am Poor Deer.*

I thought about it.

Does Penny ever forgive me? I asked.

*Never. She loves Sam Snickers.*

Will Glo ever forgive me?

*She will name her second child after you.*

Well, that's something, I said.

\* \* \*

Poor Deer took her leave of me. I imagine she wanted to give me some time alone to think it over. I sat there alone in the dark and listened to the soft exhalations of Penny and Glo as they slept and sighed. My thoughts turned unexpectedly in the direction of my dear old teacher, Miss Rudnicki. I began to imagine what it would be like for Miss Rudnicki when she heard the news that a girl she had once tutored in the art of reading stories about boys and their dogs had murdered a man

in cold blood, running him over many times until his head burst like a too-ripe summer squash. Maybe Miss Rudnicki will be sipping tea on the concrete patio of her condominium when she hears the news, out there in her senior community in Arizona, where she had retired. She'll be admiring her cactus garden and reminding herself how happy she is to have left the snow behind forever to live in a place where her arthritis never twinges, and then, just like every other morning, Miss Rudnicki will casually open up her morning paper—but what is this? What is this? Is it really a picture of the nine-fingered girl, all grown up?—and next to the picture of the nine-fingered girl will be a grainy photo of Little Ida's Motor Lodge, eleven miles east of Niagara Falls, with police tape strung up all around it. There will be a body in the parking lot, covered over with a sheet but with one foot sticking out. Miss Rudnicki will read the story from start to finish and then she will say a prayer for the crushed Sam Snickers—that's his foot, sticking out from under the sheet—and when she is done with her prayer she will say to herself: *You never can tell what a child will grow up to be.* All at once the sun will seem too bright and hot for her old, tired eyes, and she will go inside, in the shade, and pour herself a cool drink of water from the tap and gulp it down. Eleven months later Miss Rudnicki will write a letter in her perfectly shaped baroque handwriting, and she will send this letter to the nine-fingered girl, who, by the time the letter comes, will be lying on a little iron bed, staring up at the line of bare lightbulbs that are stuck to the low gray ceiling of her death row cell. Sometimes those bare lightbulbs will look like distant stars. Sometimes they will look like small gaping mouths. Sometimes they will look like all-seeing, malevolent eyes.

*Courage!* Miss Rudnicki will write.

\* \* \*

I stayed up that night, going over the scenarios. I wasn't sure Poor Deer had thought through every contingency. She was probably right that if I ran over Sam Snickers many times in a deliberative manner then I'd likely end up with a life sentence and probably the death penalty. I would finally atone for what I'd done to Agnes Bickford. I would have saved Penny and

Glo from certain death at the hands of a monster. I kept hearing Poor Deer's voice in my head, saying: *No greater love hath a girl like you than to lay down her life for her friends.* I thought about all the terrible things that Penny and Glo had told me about Sam Snickers. A man like that might well have a gun in his car. I would need to act quickly. I would need to finish the job before he had a chance to defend himself.

*It's a good plan. No one will miss you. Even your mother gets what she wants. She can move on without worrying about you ever again.*

Poor Deer was right. It all made perfect sense.

I made up my mind that Sam Snickers must die.

## Twenty-Seven

**THE NEXT MORNING I TOOK GLO DOWN TO THE RIVER TO SEE** the frogs. I took my mother's pocketbook with me because Penny had been borrowing money at a rapid clip and I still needed to pay for our room. Although Glo and I couldn't see a river from room 127—the view from our room was of a dumpster, overflowing—we knew the river was there, because it was on the map, and because we could hear the chorus of frogs and other living things coming from that direction.

When we got back from the river, Penny wasn't in the room, and her duffel bag was gone.

There was a note for me on the rickety desk.

*I'm sorry. Take care of her,* the note said.

Glo was busy bouncing on the bed and then she asked me to put a dime into the Magic Fingers box to make the whole bed vibrate and I did. Glo giggled, because it tickled. I was too tense about my failure to kill Sam Snickers to enjoy the Magic Fingers myself. I had not expected Penny to be already gone when we got back from the river. Penny was supposed to be on the phone when we came back. Sam Snickers was supposed to come later in the day. I was supposed to run him down and crush his head under the wheel of Herb Grubb's fancy car and then I was supposed to die in the electric chair for my crimes. Poor Deer's plan was all in tatters. The tick-tock moment when I was supposed to run into Sam Snickers's back fender, enraging him enough to come hurtling out of his car in my direction, thus giving me the opportunity to flatten him good, had come and gone. Thanks to Sam Snickers's unexpected punctuality I would never get another chance. Also: I was

confused by the open-ended nature of Penny's note. Did she want me to take care of Glo for a single afternoon, or forever?

As soon as the Magic Fingers turned itself off Glo asked me to put another dime in the box. I told her she could watch Captain Kangaroo instead. I turned on the set and found the right channel and then I went out to the front desk and rang the bell. A woman came gliding out from behind a beaded curtain. Her name tag said IDA SHEPHERD and she was eating a bread-and-butter sandwich.

"Did you see where my friend went?" I asked her. "From room 127?"

"That girl? Room 127? Her man came. They were very lovey-dovey!"

"Where did they go?" I said.

Ida Shepherd shrugged.

"When is she coming back?"

Ida couldn't say.

"Settle up today?" she said.

Ida handed me an invoice. I thanked her and told her I'd settle up before checkout time. On the way back to the room I wasn't surprised to see that the sky had begun to fill with ominous clouds. Glo was standing on the bed and sucking her fingers. She told me she was hungry. I told her that in a few minutes we would go across the street to the Automat and I would buy her a donut. But in the meantime, she should let me be, because I needed to think.

My first thought was about Penny and how I hadn't saved her. But this time, instead of feeling the familiar terrible weight of grief and guilt fall on me like a rock, suffocating my spirit, I heard Aunt Dolly's cheery garrulous voice in my head, and Aunt Dolly's voice was saying to me: *Listen, honey, I will be honest with you, what happens to that girl is out of your hands.* I looked down at my empty hands. Once again, my Aunt Dolly had got it right. Penny's fate wasn't in them.

My next thought was about money. I needed to count what I had and compare it with the invoice Ida Shepherd had just handed to me. I took what money was left out of my mother's pocketbook. We had enough to pay the motel bill, plus seven dollars for whatever came next.

My third thought was: Isn't that the way it is. Just when I'm good and ready to do the right thing and to kill Sam Snickers, something comes along to gum up the plan. I had never been in charge of this story. Neither had Poor Deer been in charge of this story, that old fraud. I wondered where that old fraud was hiding herself.

Glo was looking at me skeptically.

As for my own eyes, they had been opened.

I decided to call my mother. It would cost me a buck-fifty to speak with her if I kept it under three minutes.

"You wicked girl, you stole Herb Grubb's car," my mother said.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Give that phone to me, Flo!" I heard Herb Grubb say.

I heard the sound of a small tussle and then Herb Grubb's voice was on the line.

"You listen to me, you little snake," he said. "You can keep that damn car as long as you keep driving in the opposite direction of your mother and me. Go straight to hell for all I care. The minute I see you anywhere near my Florence I'm going to see you're prosecuted for grand theft auto. You'll rot in jail if I see to it. If you ever call this number again, I'm going to hire a detective to find you and to haul you back here by your hair to face your crimes. You've given your mother enough grief, you hear? Just stay away from us and we have no quarrel!"

He hung up.

I asked Glo if she could tell me anything about where her mother might have gone. She shook her head. All she could tell me was that she and her mother had lived with Sam



Snickers in a house that had a crabapple tree in the yard. Then she reminded me she was hungry.

I took Glo across the street to the Automat and bought her the donut I had promised her, along with a box of milk. I could do without food for now. I noticed that when she was hungry Glo had the same raffish eating style as her mother, storing the grub in her cheek pockets like a squirrel preparing for winter before chewing and swallowing it down. Thanks to my mother and my aunt, I had learned some manners. In the long-ago days when my mother and aunt and I had still sat down to Sunday Dinners together each week without fail, we had always set the table with two spoons each. Maybe one day I'd teach Glo how to set a table and how to take small bites.

My musings about Sunday Dinners from long ago were beginning to make me hungry. I was also beginning to regret the dime I'd wasted on the Magic Fingers. Glo had not asked about her mother yet. I understood her that way. I admired her for accepting life as it comes. Penny was probably going to come back any minute to collect her daughter, but I wasn't sure. When we got back to Ida's from the Automat, there was still no sign of Penny anywhere. Noon was checkout time. It came and went. About three o'clock we crossed the street back over to the Automat and I bought Glo a sandwich. That left us with a dollar and forty-seven cents.

"What do we do now?" Glo said.

I thought awhile.

"We're going to leave a note at the motel for your mother, honey," I said. "So she'll know that I'm taking good care of you, until she comes back for you."

Ida wasn't keen to be the keeper of a note from me.

"I have let you stay in the room long past checkout time but I am not going to be your personal messaging service," she said.

I could only agree that her hospitality and patience had been sorely taxed by me, but when I told her this, so plainly

and truthfully, she unexpectedly took pity on me and let me leave a note with her for Penny after all.

*The person handing you this note is Ida Shepherd, my note said. It's way past checkout time, and we need to go soon. After you're done reading this note, please leave word with Ida Shepherd what you want me to do with your child. I'll call here tonight to get your message.*

Then I added:

*I hope you're alive.*

*Love, Margaret*

\* \* \*

Glo and I went back down by the river to say good-bye to that old bullfrog but he never made a repeat appearance and the mosquitoes were ferocious. Soon the mosquitoes convinced us we were on a fool's errand trying to gain any more wisdom from that place. It was dusk by then and with nothing better to do we went for a stroll down the little main strip. There was not much more to see in that part of the world except for Little Ida's Motor Lodge, though, and the Automat across the street, and a couple of gas stations, and a square squat building at the end of the block that housed the local chapter of the Grange. After the Grange came the big vacant lot where the itinerant amusement park had been set up just the day before. Now it was nothing but a trampled vacant lot again. After the vacant lot came the everlasting cornfields. We turned around and walked back. I kept wondering how I could have gotten this story so wrong. I kept wondering how Penny was doing. Above all I kept hoping that Poor Deer, whom I had lately discovered was not infallible, was completely mistaken about Penny's fate. Maybe Penny's story wasn't about to come to an abrupt end, after all.

Glo must have been hungry again by this time, but she had a seventh sense about her, or maybe some acquaintance with deprivation and neglect, because she didn't complain. When we got back to the motel I dug around in the trunk of the car and found a Hershey's candy bar so old that it was the color of sand and I gave it to her and she ate it without complaint.

We checked in with Ida.

Ida told us she had not received a message and that we needed to get our things out of room 127 and move the car from her parking lot before she towed it. She reminded me once more that checkout time had been noon and it was only out of the goodness of her heart that she had allowed us to tarry for so long, but her goodwill toward us had been fully spent.

When Glo and I went to collect our things out of room 127 the door was wide open. I was so sure that Penny had come back—all day I'd been waiting with the certainty I would see her any minute—that I ran to see. But it wasn't Penny in room 127. It was Poor Deer. There she was, that old fraud, crouched in her usual corner and looking more than ever like a sad old pile of clothes. I began to give her a piece of my mind, but her condition was so pitiable that I lost heart. The slope of her shoulders was the shape of grief itself.

*She's never coming back, is she?* Poor Deer said.

She looked so sad. Her fury had spent itself. Now that her plan for me had been thwarted by Sam Snickers's punctuality, the hate and rage had drained right out of her. Her body was racked by sobs. And so I went to her. I stroked her pelt. We cried together, me and this musky beast, each for our own private reasons or maybe it was for the same reasons. She grunted and sighed, and sighed and grunted, and now and then her eyes would look at me with such wretchedness in them that all I wanted for her was to find solace. At some point Poor Deer's cloven hooves had become little hands and it wasn't Poor Deer who was crying with me in this corner of room 127. It was Glo, crying for her mother. She had her little hands over her face and she was crying into them. Her little fingernails were bitten to the quick. I tried to hug her but she didn't like it, and so I let go.

"I'm here," I said. "I'm not going anywhere. Here is my hand."

Glo didn't take my hand. She was taking stock. Her expression was tearstained and noncommittal. I didn't blame

her. As a mother-substitute I wasn't even half good. But I wasn't just a nobody, either. I could have reminded her that the two of us had, by then, bonded over moths and frogs and gross disappointments. She had held my hand in the past. She had even sat in my lap once or twice. Maybe Glo was busy mulling over these same points in my favor, because, without any prompting from me, she gave me a stoic little nod and stood up. She set her little shoulders. The two of us walked out of room 127 together. We got into Herb Grubb's fancy car and I started it up and we drove away. For about twenty minutes I drove in a meandering manner and then I pulled over by the side of the road because I didn't know where we were going.

I thought awhile.

Then I knew.

"We are going to Sandusky, Ohio," I said.

"Okay," Glo said.

\* \* \*

Along the way to Sandusky, Ohio, Glo will make up a song to pass the time, and the words to her song will be: "On the Slimy Bottom! Slip-slop! Slip-slop!" and that is the whole song but I think it's pretty catchy. We'll sing it off and on until we reach Sandusky, where we'll drive straight to the return address on the envelope in my mother's pocketbook.

We'll get there at seven in the morning.

There will be gulls in the sky.

"This is it," I'll say.

Glo and I walk up a brick-bordered walk lined with tulips. Glo rings the bell. Ruby Bickford answers it.

"Is that you, Margaret Murphy? Out so early, and without a coat?" Ruby says.

I'm not sure if Ruby is going to invite us in but she does. The house is stuffed with Hummel Figurines, lined up on shelves and on every wall. Ruby's Hummel Figurines remind me of the way my old friend Maarten De Smedt used to collect beer steins from the old country.

“Sit, make yourself at home,” Ruby says.

We sit awhile.

“Is this your girl?” she says.

“I think so,” I say.

A man comes down the stairs in a plaid wool robe and leather scuff-slippers. He looks just like his sister.

“Everett, this is Florence Murphy’s daughter, come for a visit,” Ruby says.

“I’m Margaret,” I say.

“I know who you are,” Everett says.

“Everett, take Margaret’s little girl to the kitchen for a glass of milk,” Ruby says. “Or better yet, take her out for a nice breakfast somewhere and after that take her to swing on the swings in the park. Give Margaret and me some time to catch up.”

“I’m in my robe and pajamas,” Everett says.

“Do I need to dress you myself?” Ruby says.

Her brother goes upstairs to dress while Ruby and I smile politely and Glo looks around.

Everett comes downstairs.

“Come with me, little girl,” he says. “My name is Everett.”

“My name is Gloria,” Glo says.

Everett and Glo go out on their small adventure.

Here we are, Ruby and me.

“It’s been a long time,” she says.

“It certainly has,” I say.

“How is your mother?” she says.

It feels like a fraught question for me to respond to in any detail, and so I tell Ruby that my mother is fine and leave it at that. Ruby doesn’t ask about Aunt Dolly. I’m not surprised, because those two were never close. I sense that we’re

approaching the end of our necessary small talk and that it's getting to be time for me to say what I have come to say and so I come out with it.

"I killed Agnes," I say. "We were playing a game called 'Awake, Oh Princess,' and I couldn't work the hasp, and I ran away. I've come to ask for your forgiveness."

We sit for a while.

"Thank you, Margaret," she says. "Thank you for coming all this way to tell me. I do forgive you, dear. And I'm sorry, too. I'm sorry for the way I meant to kill you that night in the hospital just after they cut your septic finger off."

"I don't remember that," I say.

"Well, I do," she says. "If the night nurse hadn't come in when she did, then I would have done it. You'd be dead."

We sit a while longer.

"You must be very tired from your journey," she says. "Can I make you a cup of tea?"

We go to the kitchen. Ruby puts the kettle on. Everett and Glo come back inside. They've only been gone a couple of minutes. I can tell Everett is uneasy about leaving me alone with his sister and that he truncated his trip with Glo on account of his unease.

"Everett, dear, I'm going to invite Margaret and her little girl to stay with us," Ruby says. "Margaret, you and your child are welcome to stay as long as you like."

"Ruby!" Everett says. Because he has heard the stories about me.

"Quiet, Everett. I've made up my mind," Ruby says. "Margaret and her girl are welcome. It's no skin off your nose. I've been washing your laundry and making your meals three times a day for a dozen years and this is what I want to do."

Maybe it will happen that way.

\* \* \*

On our way to Sandusky, Glo made up a song to pass the time and the two of us sang it for hours. Then Glo said she needed to go to the potty and so we stopped at a gas station. The toilet seat was so dirty that I held Glo in the air above the pot like she was in a little hammock, and when she peed it splashed on my legs but I didn't mind. I felt very tenderly toward her. After we got back in the car I tucked her tight in the back and covered her with Herb Grubb's swank jacket and told her it was time for her to sleep and she nodded and closed her eyes.

After we crossed the state line into Ohio, I felt something change, in me or the world. Such is the power of imaginary made-up borders. For the first time in my life, I began to imagine the possibility of forgiveness. I began to think that maybe I, Margaret Murphy, might be forgiven one day. Oh, maybe not by Ruby Bickford, although I still hoped for it. But maybe by me. By me.

That's when Poor Deer—who by then was no more than a soft habit of a whisper in my ear—interrupted me to say that it would never happen. That I would never, never forgive.

But my mind kept insisting that I might. My mind began to imagine a story where Margaret Murphy lived happily for the rest of her days, until she was an old woman living at the end of a Giant Thumb, resting in God's own Hand, and, oh!—just look at the magnificent flowers her friends have brought to cheer her, how beloved she must be!—

From the back seat Glo spoke up in her sleep but I could not understand a word. There was no moon that night. It was dark all around. The taillights of the semis were drawing long ribbons across the plains.

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## About the Author

**CLAIRE OSHETSKY** is the author of *Chouette*, which was a PEN/Faulkner nominee; the winner of the William Saroyan International Prize for Writing; and a finalist for the Northern California Book Award and the Barbellion Prize. They live in Santa Cruz, California, with their family.

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